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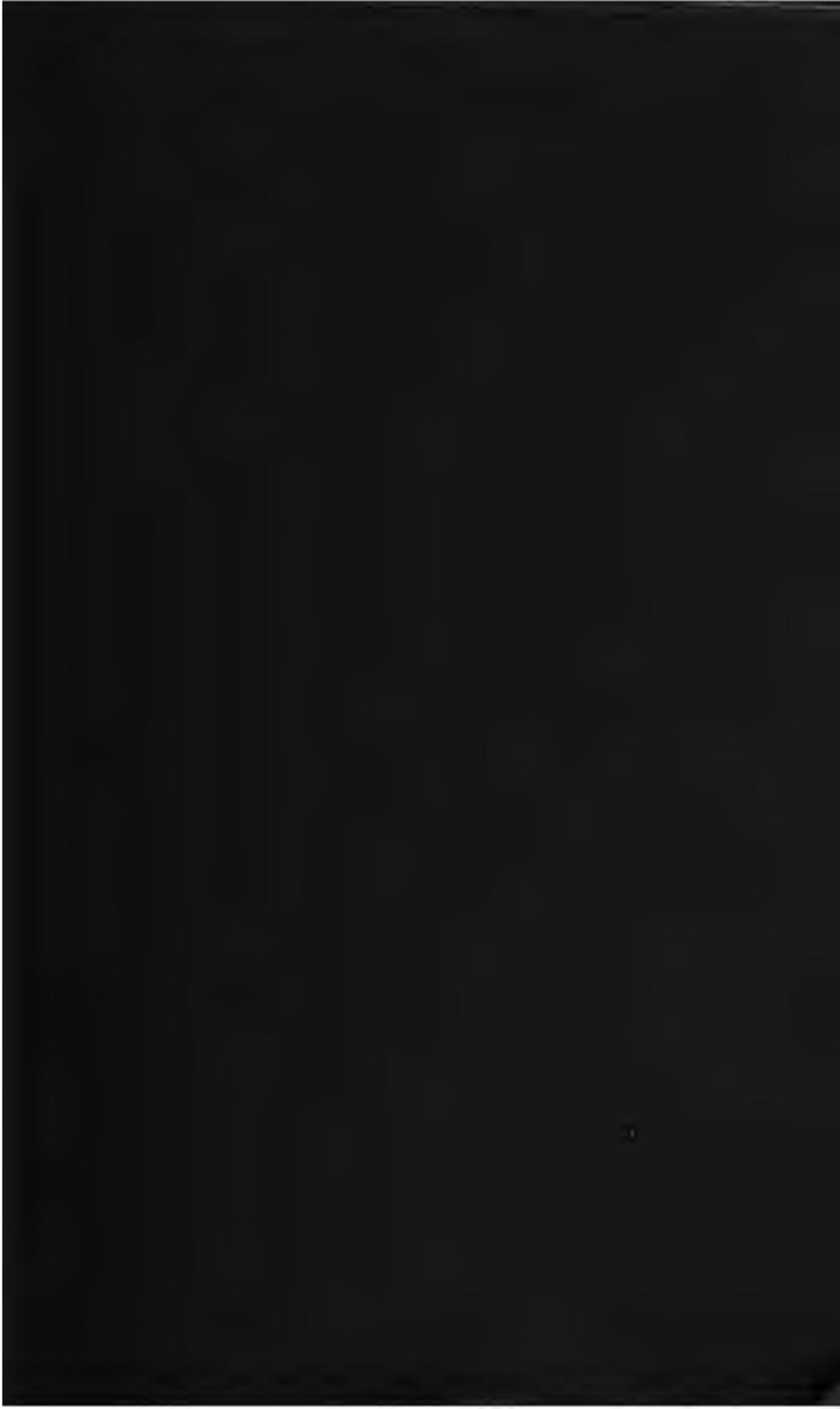
NOT QUITE

HEROINE



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NOT QUITE A HEROINE.



Not quite a Heroine.

BY C. A. JONES,

AUTHOR OF

"CHURCH STORIES;" "STORIES FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR," ETC.

"By soft endearments in kind strife,
Lightening the load of daily life."

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TO
MRS. LEE
THIS LITTLE BOOK
IS VERY AFFECTIONATELY
DEDICATED.



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NOT QUITE A HEROINE.

CHAPTER I.

THE LIBRARY AT THE OLD DEANERY.

“But I must rule and govern still,
And always give the law,
And have each subject at my will,
And all to stand in awe.”

THERE was an old, low-roofed house, with projecting buttresses, and carved gables, standing just behind the grand Cathedral of Northminster, at which strangers used to gaze with almost as much interest as at the beautiful Church itself; and some would remark that it looked dull and sombre, and others would say how peaceful life must be in such a home, just within the shadow of those holy walls, which loving, pious hands had raised in olden days to the honour and glory of GOD.

The quaint old house was the Deanery, and the three young people standing in the gloaming before the huge log fire in the low oak-panelled

library one cold snowy December afternoon, were the Dean's son and daughters, Harry, Blanche and Amy Melville.

Loud and clear the youthful voices rose in some animated discussion, considerable excitement both of tone and manner was visible. You could see at a glance that something had ruffled the tempers of at least two of the party.

"I tell you I cannot bear it, and I will not," said Amy, a bright-faced, golden-haired maiden, of some fifteen summers. "Margaret is always interfering and stopping all our fun, really it will soon be improper to walk across to the Cathedral to matins and evensong; actually, Hal, she saw Vernon Heathcote at the door, he had only come to ask us to help with the decorations, and in her stiffest, primmest manner she said, 'Yes, they shall come as soon as I am ready.'"

"More than that," put in the usually indolent, somewhat apathetic Blanche, "she told him that father did not care for us to go into the Cathedral and work with the others, because sometimes we all began to talk, and talking led to laughter, and—and—I don't know what more she said," continued the indignant maiden, "but of course Vernon ran off and made a fine story of it to the others, and they will say that the Dean's daughters are nicely sat upon by their elder sister. As if we could not be trusted to behave ourselves at *our* age," and Blanche drew herself up with all the offended dignity of her sixteen years.

There came a long, low whistle from Harry, who had remained standing quietly before the fire during his sisters' harangue, with something of an amused smile upon his bright young face.

"Harry," said Amy, impatiently, "I believe you are in league with Margaret, there is no getting any sympathy from you."

"You shall have my sympathy when it's needed, my dears, but really I don't see much occasion for it at present; but come, be good girls, I hear Margaret in the distance, take her easy, and go to the Cathedral with her, and don't go skurrying off with the Heathcote set, you know how father dislikes it, and Margaret was right in what she said, although I must own she sometimes can be rather down upon a fellow."

Harry had only been at home two hours, and what at another time might have been considered interference, was now accepted cheerfully by his sisters; they were both quite willing to take his advice and make the best of things, the cloud vanished from the ruffled brows, the two pretty hats, which had been thrown upon a chair in the first burst of Blanche's and Amy's indignation, were donned, and very bright and trim did the young sisters look, when Margaret came into the library to tell them she was quite ready to start.

It was a plain, most people would have said a hard face,—that of the Dean's eldest daughter. There had been a time when Margaret had been considered the prettiest little maiden in all North-

minster, but that was long years ago ; an attack of smallpox, of the most virulent kind, had brought her to the gates of death. GOD spared the young life, but when Margaret rose from her sick bed, the sweet childish features were hardly to be recognized.

“You are not Maggie Melville?” and “Oh, how ugly you have grown!” were the respective greetings of the little Stanleys, the very precocious, undisciplined children of one of the Minor Canons, when the poor little girl, with her scarred, swollen face, appeared amongst her companions once more.

Thoughtless words, heedlessly uttered, but they left their mark upon Margaret’s whole life, they changed her from a thoughtless, sunny child, into a moody, discontented maiden. Things might have been different had her sweet young mother lived, but three months after Margaret recovered from that terrible sickness, the Dean’s wife went from her happy home in the Cathedral Yard, to what those who loved her best, trusted was yet greater, more perfect joy.

“Margaret will be a comfort to you, dear,” she had said to her husband on that last day of her life on earth, when the thought of the future, that looked so dark and dismal for him, weighed heavily upon her. “Young as the child is, there is an earnestness of purpose about her, which seems to be growing day by day.”

The mother did not know the blight that had fallen upon her little girl’s life ; she had not heard, no one had heard, of those thoughtless words of

the little Stanleys. She had been ill nearly a year, and Margaret, in her unselfishness, was always happy and bright when she was with her, and the changed features did not look so very changed, to the loving eyes that thought there was no one in all the world like her own "Magsie."

"Arnold, dearest," the Dean's dying wife said later on that autumn day, "Arnold, dearest, I must see our children."

The Dean went out silently, to summon the little group to the still, darkened room.

They followed him with an expression of awe upon their young faces, Margaret, the twelve years old "eldest one," and Hal, a bright-eyed, chubby fellow of four, whilst Blanche and Amy, little baby girls of three and two years old, were carried in their father's arms and put gently down upon their mother's bed.

A gleam of autumnal sunshine fell through the latticed windows into the peaceful room, and the old Cathedral clock struck the hour of three. Never again did Dean Melville hear those three solemn strokes, without breathing a prayer for her whom God had pleased to take from him.

Margaret and Hal stood at the head of the bed. "Margaret," said the gentle voice, "my little Margaret, you will love them all and care for them all?"

"Yes, mother, I will."

There was strange strength and resolution in the tone, and a look of mingled trust and love lit up

the dying features. Hal, you will be a good boy, and help Magsie?"

"Yes, I will fight for her with my sword and my gun."

A smile, faint and shadowy, and yet most strangely bright. The Dean thought then, that he should look for his darling in Paradise with that smile upon her face. Then she signed for them all to kiss her; they did her bidding very quietly, and Blanche and Amy seemed to understand that there must be silence now.

A few more hours, and the passing bell told the people of Northminster that the soul of the Dean's wife was winging its way to the unseen world, strengthened and refreshed for the dark journey by the Heavenly Food upon which she had fed in the quiet stillness of the autumn morning.

It was only in the months that followed that the Dean noted the change that had come over Margaret, and knew that something was weighing down the young bright spirit, that some sorrow which was not the sorrow of her mother's death, had come into the girl's life.

Strange to say he did not suspect what it was. To him she was unchanged. He was only thankful that she had been spared to him; it was a matter of the most perfect indifference to the thoughtful, somewhat absent, priest and scholar, that the childish promise of beauty was a thing of the past, to him she was always loving and gentle,

but he could not fail to perceive that to others she was gloomy and morose.

And yet with it all she was so good, so rigidly scrupulous in performing all her duties, so steady *in* the schoolroom, so thoughtful for him, and for the little ones *out* of it.

So the years passed on, and when time had changed Blanche and Amy from little baby children, into bright, pretty girls, the difference in Margaret grew even more apparent, and the father sighed and wondered what had come to his "eldest."

He was gentle and tender as a woman would have been, with her, and her love for him fell little short of idolatry, but by word or gesture, she never showed it, she had learned to think of herself as unloving and unloved, she lived in a world of her own creation, she was always dreaming of things that might have been, if only that great trouble had not come upon her, if only she had been bright and attractive as others were.

Her sisters' young companions often penetrated into the silent, solemn old Deanery, and on these occasions poor Margaret always looked hard and severe, and yet she thought that she was doing her duty as her dead mother would have her do it, by trying to keep Blanche and Amy free from all possible contamination, whilst she was really estranging the girls' affections from herself, making them what she would willingly have laid down her life to avoid—somewhat sly and deceitful.

Kneeling in her own room, poor Margaret would ask for help and guidance, in the life that looked so dark and dreary,—there were times when the thought of the one Love that must be all-perfect, all-satisfying, came in answer to her supplications, and when she tried for the spirit of perfect resignation which she knew she must attain ;—but there was one obstacle to be overcome, one foe to fight, of whose existence she was not aware,—and that foe was her own selfishness,—rather her own thought of her self ;—Margaret would have sacrificed herself for others willingly, have worn herself out in their service, but she would not at that time have parted with one iota of her morbid spirit ; she rather revelled in her melancholy, instead of waging war against it, and seeing where the fault really lay. She was happiest when Harry was at home, he had been her champion through all those long weary years, fighting for her “with his sword and his gun” when he was a tiny boy, and bringing more formidable weapons to the front each time he returned from school,—i.e. showing Blanche and Amy very gently, but with the quiet determined elder brother’s air which seemed natural to him, that Margaret must be treated with respect, in his presence.

She stood before him in the gloaming when the two girls went out of the library on that December afternoon, and laid her hands upon his shoulders and looked into his clear, honest, blue eyes with something of a mother’s love and pride.

"Hal, dear, father is so pleased that you have done so well."

"Is he? I am glad: I got into a terrible fright at the last, I can tell you, and I am thankful it's over; defend me from another exam. for some months to come at least! And how have you been getting on, Magsie?"

"Oh, Hal, those Heathcotes are more troublesome than ever; Blanche and Amy have been telling you about them, I suppose; I know they think I am hard and unreasonable, but I cannot bear to see them so fond of the society of those who cannot fail to do them harm."

"I know it's awfully difficult for you to keep those two in order, but sometimes, Magsie, I—I—I wish you would not try so hard."

"You think I am disagreeable."

"No, hardly that, I can't quite explain, but if they were let alone a little, they might not be so perverse; hark, they are calling you now, and they have been waiting an age. I must just run up and wash my hands, and I will be in the Cathedral in five minutes."

Margaret walked to the door lingeringly, a talk with Harry would have been so much pleasanter than keeping guard over her sisters in the Cathedral; and there was just the shadow of an uncomfortable feeling at her heart, just a vague undefined fear, that perhaps after all she was making a mistake, and that Harry was right; it would be better not to try so hard to keep the girls in order.



CHAPTER II.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

“And who can tell what secret links of thought
Bind heart to heart?”

ADELAIDE PROCTER.

“O H why is the train so late to-day of all days,
Thomas?”

The individual thus addressed, a quaint looking old coachman of a type now almost out of date, grinned from ear to ear, at his young mistress' evident impetuosity, and answered discreetly,

“There's no telling the reason of them trains being behindhand, Miss Katie, but to-day, may be there's extra passengers, being, as you may say, so close upon Christmas.”

“Yes,” persisted the impatient girl, “but last Christmas it was not a bit late ; don't you remember, Thomas, that you and I came to meet Charlie—I mean Master Charlie—and we were just coming through the turnpike when the Cathedral clock struck five, and we were late, indeed we were,

Thomas,—don't you recollect how fast you had to drive?"

"No, Miss, I can't say as how I do," replied the old servant, "you see I comes to meet these here trains oftener than you do, and I'm up to their freaks, I am ; 'I know there's no relying upon one of them no more than on a woman,' says I to Robinson the porter last time I was here ; it's a good thing that they're always spoke of as *shes*, for more fickle, unpunctual, womanly vehicles I never comded across."

Katie Howard smiled brightly as the old man finished his somewhat garrulous speech, with a grunt of satisfaction, but the smile was not called forth so much by his words, as by the sound of the long shrill whistle which proclaimed that the eagerly expected train, which after all was only five minutes beyond its time, was fast approaching Northminster Station.

A marked contrast to the Dean's young daughters, in their trim jackets and pretty hats, was Katharine Howard, the third daughter of Squire Howard of the Grange,—a tall, rather awkward-looking maiden of some fifteen years, dressed in a plaid dress, which she had somewhat outgrown, and a jacket which bore evident tokens of having seen two or three winters' wear, and a hat—well, we need not describe the hat—it was just in keeping with the rest of the attire. With all these disadvantages there was yet that about the girl which proved beyond doubt that she was a lady, there

was something in the tones of the very refined voice that told of good birth and high breeding, and the face that you caught a glimpse of in the gaslight was very sweet, a girlish face with a bright fresh colour, and deep grey eyes and golden hair, and an eager expression lighting it all up now, and giving it a peculiar charm which was not always there.

Another whistle, a dull, monotonous, puffing sound, a whole volume of smoke issuing from the steaming engine, then the shouts of porters, and the welcome of friends on the platform, to friends in the train, and Katie stood straining her eyes and gazing into all the second-class carriages, and a dull heavy feeling of disappointment was at her heart, for she had come to meet her brother Charlie, and no Charlie was to be seen.

“Hullo, here I am,” and a laughing face, bearing a strange ugly resemblance to her own, looked roguishly into Katie’s. “Hold hard,” said Charlie, “we’ll do the kissing when we get home, and besides I’ve something to say. I came down a swell, first class; met an old girl at the Station who wanted a hot-water tin, porter not to the front, so I fetched one for her, then she caught sight of my name and address on my bag, and declared I must be my uncle’s nephew, and so of course I am. She meant Uncle Walter, father’s uncle, who was killed in India; she knew him well, and says I’m just like him; what a handsome fellow he must have been, must he not, Katie?”

Katie's only answer was a merry laugh.

"Come along," said Charlie, "she wants to know you," and the next minute Katie found herself at the door of a first-class carriage, whilst an old lady with the quaintest little flaxen curls imaginable looked at her lovingly.

"My dear, I am very glad to see you; your brother is a very nice boy, has learnt to pay respect to age. I knew your great-uncle Walter very well; he was going to be married to my sister Amy, and she never lifted up her head again after she heard that he was killed. Tell your father that you have seen me; my name is Miss Griselda Martin. And now good-bye, my dears; I'm an old woman, and you are just entering upon life, but if ever in the days that are to come you want a friend, think of me and write to me; here is my address. I never forget a kindness, and that merry lad was not ashamed of putting himself out to be civil to me to-day."

"Good-bye, ma'am," said Charlie, politely raising his hat, as the train went slowly out of the Station, "I'm very much obliged to you for paying my extra fare, I like first class better than second, any day."

"She's a nice old lady, Charlie," said Katie, "I wonder whether we shall ever see her again."

"Well, I shan't pine away if I don't: who else is here?"

"Only Thomas and the dog-cart; father and

"No, father, it will do me good, if I could only think you will not want me at home."

"That could hardly be, dear ; I don't quite see how we are to get on without you, but the girls and I must do our best, for God has put this kind thought into your heart, Margaret, and I dare not say that you must not go."

So she went, and for a fortnight she never left Katie's bed-side, and the happiest day she had known for many a long year was the day on which her charge was pronounced out of danger, and Dr. Browne, with tears in his honest old eyes, said, "My dear, it is to you, under God's blessing, that the child owes her life."

And Katie, in the long quiet hours of convalescence, learned to love her nurse ; the cold somewhat repelling manner did not frighten her, as it did most people, and Margaret in her turn felt a strange yearning tenderness towards the sick girl who was so helpless, and dependent upon her. And the friendship lasted when Margaret went back to the Deanery ; Blanche and Amy could not understand what it was that made "that strange Katie" so fond of their grave elder sister ; but Harry in the holidays had seen the new brightness that had come into Margaret's life, and had said to Katie, "You must take care of her when I am away ; she's awfully bothered sometimes."

His words came back to her very often, and she tried in her simple childish way to fulfil the trust he had reposed in her.

She thought, as Margaret left the Cathedral with Blanche and Amy, that she looked more than usually worried, and she was wondering what she could do to help her, when Harry drew near and beckoned her into the Yard.

“Here,” he said; “this is for you;” and he put into her hand a small frame containing a photograph of that most exquisite of all Ary Scheffer’s lovely works, the Good Shepherd.

The pure clear light of the December moon fell upon the thorn-crown’d brow, and upon the face with all its expression of unutterable love.

Katie looked at it earnestly: “Thank you, Harry,” she said, in quiet reverent tones, and he understood how much she liked it, and was satisfied.

Those two had been friends all their lives, and Harry did not know, (how should he?) how much he tried to please Katie, and how next to his father and “Magsie” he thought of her more than of any one in the world.

“Is not this a lovely piece of holly?” he said, holding up a little branch all sparkling with bright variegated leaves, and shining berries.

“Yes; may I have it? I should like to put it above my new picture.”

“Now then,” cried Charlie, “when you have settled the affairs of the nation we’ll be off.”

Katie jumped lightly into the dog-cart, Charlie sprang up beside her, and the gates of the Grange were soon reached, and the brother and sister were driving up the long straight avenue.

"Ha!" exclaimed Charlie; "more trees cut down I see since I was here."

"Yes; is it not a pity?" answered Katie; "father says the place is damp, and he thinks it improves it."

"I don't; but here we are, and there's the governor standing on the steps."

The boy flung the reins to Thomas, and jumped down to receive the Squire's hearty greeting. "Why, Charlie, old fellow, you've grown half a head since last term; I must measure you by-and-by; the Mother and the others are all waiting for you in the Refuge."

"All right, father; I'll not harrow up their feelings any longer; only, Kittums, please get me something to eat; tell Sparkes to see about it."

"Sparkes has gone, Charlie."

"Oh, I forgot; Maria is footman and butler, and everything else, isn't she? well, she'll do, so long as she satisfies the cravings of hunger, in some substantial way; and don't let her forget the pickles; and now I'm off to the Refuge, I want to tell them all about Miss Griselda, and about the Heathcotes' party, a juvenile next Thursday, we are all to be asked."



CHAPTER III.

URSULA.

“ They also serve who only stand and wait.”

“ **T**HE Refuge,” so called because every member of the household, from the Squire down to the gardener’s boy, took his or her griefs and worries and troubles there, was Ursula Howard’s room ; day after day she was to be found in the same place, lying on the couch, drawn in to the deep bay window, and there was always the same sweet look upon her face, always a bright cheerful welcome for every one.

For ten years she had never left that little room.

She had been the brightest, nicest, merriest girl in all the county,—life had indeed seemed to smile upon the Squire’s eldest daughter. Her love had been sought and won by the son of an old neighbour ; an October day was fixed upon for the wedding. One afternoon late in September she went out for a ride with Harvey Russell ; there was an accident, her horse shied almost imperceptibly, and

threw her roughly against the trunk of a tree. Harvey despatched the groom to the Grange with the sad news, and the carriage was sent to bring Ursula home.

The best surgeons from London were in attendance ere twelve hours had passed : their opinions differed, one pronounced the case hopeless, the two others talked of time, and rest, and care, and of course they all believed those who spoke as they wished.

Ere two months had expired, Harvey Russell sailed for India without his sweet young bride.

“ In a year, my darling, I will come back for you,” he had said, leaning over her couch, and trying to be brave and hopeful.

“ Yes, Harvey, if it be God’s will ; anyhow we will trust.”

She knew better than any of them that the dream of her life, and of his, must be at an end, but she would not add to his pain by telling him so ; she would let him take away with him God’s own heaven-sent gift of hope, and when the year should have expired, she would pray that he might have strength to bear his trial.

A few weeks passed, and then there came to England the news of a terrible shipwreck, in which more than a hundred lives had been lost.

The survivors told the tale of Harvey Russell’s bravery ; told how he had never thought of himself, but how many a woman and child, and many a strong man, owed their lives to him.

He had clung on to the mast to the last ; when others were panic-struck he was calm and brave : a sailor stood near him, and Harvey took a letter and a little old Prayer Book out of his pocket, and gave it into his hands.

“Get into the boat,” he said, “you have been talking of your wife and children at home ; if you ever get back to them, which God in His mercy grant you may do, send that letter and that little book to the address you will see on the envelope, and say that my last thought and prayer were for her ; say, too, that we shall meet again on the other shore.”

The man jumped into the boat, and then there was a cry, “Come along, Mr. Russell, there is room for one more.”

“All right, I am coming ;” but as he spoke there came a huge, merciless wave, and Ursula’s lover was carried to that other shore of which he had spoken.

Ursula heard this story bit by bit ; they had said it would kill her, but grief does not often kill, it rather tends, or it ought to tend, to brace us up anew to fight the battle of life.

A change came over the girl from the day when she held Harvey’s last letter, and the little sea-stained Prayer Book in her hand ; she had been nervous and anxious about the future until then, she was resigned and restful now ; “there is nothing for me to do but to try and live my life *here* for others, and get ready to join him *there*.”

Nine years had passed away, and still with that sweet, calm look upon her face, Ursula did God service, by waiting His own good time.

Many other troubles had come into her life since then, her father's reckless extravagance and her mother's consequent anxiety, sent many a pang to the girl's heart; then there was Duncan, the eldest son and brother, whose boyhood had been so full of bright promise, and who had had to leave his regiment because of his wild reckless ways, and who had gone none knew whither in his shame and despair.

There were only Leila, and Charlie, and Katie, and little Eva at home now, for Frank and Harold, "the two big boys" as they were always called, had gone to try their fortunes in Australia, and the mother's face was very sad sometimes when she thought of her brave, loving lads in that far off land.

But she bore all her burdens cheerfully, and it was a bright, merry party upon which Charlie broke like a whirlwind, on that December evening.

"Come in, Charlie," said Mrs. Howard, "don't be shy."

"No fear of that, mother dear," and the lad's arms were pressed very tightly round his mother's neck.

And then the boy bent over Ursula with something in his manner that was very like reverence, —it was a way they all had when they approached her.

"I'm so glad, Charlie dear," she said, "it is so nice to see you."

There were two more sisters to be greeted. Leila, a pale, dreamy-looking girl, with dark brown eyes and black hair, and Eva the pet and plaything of the house, the daintiest little three years old maiden it was possible to see—a perfect picture of a child, with rosy cheeks and blue eyes, and golden hair, bearing a family likeness to Katie, and even to ugly Charlie himself.

"Well, Leila," said the boy, "have you killed Sir Hildebrand of Loveland yet? wasn't that the title of the poem you were at, when I went away?"

Leila tossed up her head with a would-be offended air, but Charlie's face was so irresistibly comical that she could not resist bursting into a merry laugh, and little Eva clapped her hands in glee at the unwonted sight, for Leila, the beauty of the family, seldom allowed herself to appear amused, even with Charlie's nonsensical sayings and doings.

She was a clever, romantic girl, but somehow the home training had not been a success with her; the mother's gentle loving influence had not been able to curb the wayward will, and it had been settled in the family councils that Leila must go to school; and so to school she went.

And now she had come home for good; improved certainly in some ways, but with that about her which Mrs. Howard could not fathom; a

strange reserve which she had never had to deal with in any of her other children.

The girl had the gift of writing romantic verses, which were sometimes read to the family, often provoking an irrepressible laugh, even from sweet, gentle Ursula.

"Sir Hildebrand was finished long ago," said Katie, who entered the room just as Charlie was inquiring the fate of the poem, "and oh, it is beautiful, he killed himself, all for the love of Lady Maude, and *she* died a month afterwards."

A long, low whistle from Charlie.

"What a pair of muffs," he exclaimed, scornfully, "they'd better have married and lived happily ever after ; that's what I intend to do."

"Oh, Charlie, that wouldn't be like a hero at all."

"Shut up, Kittums, don't let such nonsense get into your little head ; I tell you heroes can be very jolly fellows. Why there's White, the greatest brick in the school, a regular hero, thinks nothing of a black eye ; and he's always jolly ; none of your dying knight about him ; tell us, Ursie, isn't what I say true ? can't a fellow be happy and a hero too ?"

A strange, soft light, as of some far away memory, came into Ursula's eyes as she answered,

"To bear is to be heroic ; to meet sorrow bravely is to be a true hero ; and so to try and put an end to the troubles GOD sends us, must be wrong. 'He that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.'"

Charlie's merry face was grave for an instant, and then he went up to his sister and said quietly,

"That's something of what I meant, Ursula Major, only of course I could not put it into words just like a parson. Now I'm off to my cold meat and pickles; come along, Katie and Eva. Mother dear, I wish you were not going out this evening," and the boy gave his mother another loving hug, and looked into her face with an expression upon his merry, ugly features which Ursula could not understand. Charlie himself could not have told what the feeling was that came to him then, it was one of those shadows that sometimes flit across the sunshine of our lives, some note perhaps from the unseen world, striking, we know not where. In an instant the shadow had vanished, and Charlie was chasing Eva along the passage, and the echoes of the merry voices penetrated into that Refuge.

"Come and help me to dress, Leila, dear," and Mrs. Howard put her arm round the girl's waist and led her away; she had seen the sulky look come into her face, at what she considered Ursula's unwarrantable criticism of Sir Hildebrand's untimely end.

Ursula and Katie were left alone, for the young sister had not obeyed her brother's summons, but had stood thoughtfully gazing into the fire with a puzzled look upon her face.

"What is it, little one, what is troubling you?"

"Nothing, Ursie, only do you think I could ever be a hero? I should so like to be one."

“ My darling, what would father say to such lamentable ignorance? Heroine is the feminine of hero, my child.”

“ Very well, can I ever be a heroine, like those people one reads of in books?”

Ursula looked lovingly into the sweet girlish face, and then she said,

“ My darling, it is the strength to bear that constitutes a heroine. That makes the weakest child strong and enduring, as the bravest soldier. The true spirit of heroism consists in self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice. Katie, it was the spirit that of old, won the martyr’s crown, for the saints forgot themselves and lost themselves, as it were, in the love of God. And it is through Him alone that we can bear and endure unto the end ; that we can go on steadily and fearlessly, doing what is right, without fearing the consequences, although at the time they may seem to us very hard to bear. Do you understand what I mean, dear Katie?”

“ Yes, Ursula, I think I do ; it is something like the Bishop said on our Confirmation day. I don’t exactly remember the words, but they meant, that if we did what was right, God would take care of the rest.”

“ Yes, that is really better explained than I put it ; you will think of this always, Katie, darling, it will be such a help.”

“ Yes,” and Katie stooped down and kissed Ursula’s cheek, and said, “ it struck six more than five minutes ago, I ought not to have kept you.”

For from six to seven, the hour before the late dinner, it was the family custom to leave Ursula to herself. Every one had free access to "the Refuge" all the day long, but just that quiet time in the evening was all her own, given to old memories, which most of those about her thought had died out of her heart long, long ago.

Then it was that she took out of her treasure-box the few letters she had received from Harvey during the brief period of their engagement, and last, and *most* precious of all, came the sea-stained envelope and Prayer Book. There was a time when these relics had made her sad, now she could look at them with a look of hope upon her face, and night after night as she put them away, she would look up at the portrait which hung opposite her couch and say,

"I am getting ready, Harvey, for the other shore, and each day as it closes brings me nearer to you."

Katie and Charlie had the schoolroom to themselves that evening, Eva had gone to bed, and Leila was in her own room, writing what Katie confidentially announced to her brother was some day to be a three-volume novel.

Right merrily the two chattered away, Charlie telling marvellous stories of his schoolboy life, and the young sister listening and commenting by turns, thinking all the while that there was no one in all the world half as good or as amusing as Charlie.

There came an interruption. Maria brought in a letter for Charles Howard, Esq., directed in a round schoolboy hand.

Charlie opened it and frowned.

"Who is it from?" said Katie. "How very soon it is for you to get a letter, Charlie; why you only came home two hours ago."

"Be quiet, can't you?" answered Charlie, impatiently; "you never can let a fellow alone for a minute."

"I beg your pardon," was the meek response. "I am very sorry."

"Well, that will do; only show your sorrow by helping me now. You have half a sovereign in the world I suppose?"

"Yes, in the drawer of my desk."

"I want you to lend it to me."

Katie jumped up and took out her keys, then she hesitated.

"Charlie, dear Charlie, I cannot bear to be unkind, only mother made us promise never to do it. She said you must always go to father or to her."

"I tell you I can't this time. I borrowed ten shillings of that fellow Naylor a month ago, he said I might keep it until after the holidays, and now he has written and says he must have it."

"Mother would give it you, indeed she would, Charlie, but I must not."

"I tell you I dare not ask her, she will want to know what it was for, and there would be a row if

I told, for I should have to bring in other names, and I dare say the governor would write to the Head, and then there would be no end of a fuss. Now, then, will you help me or will you not?"

The tears by this time were rolling down poor Katie's cheeks ; it was so hard, so very hard to refuse Charlie anything, and yet she must do what was right at any cost, and she remembered how strongly their mother had spoken to them on the subject, how peremptorily she had forbidden them to lend money to the boys, on any pretence whatever.

" Charlie, I would do anything for you, but indeed, indeed I must not do this. Let *me* ask mother when she comes home to-night, I will keep awake and call her into my room."

" None of your humbug," was the angry, passionate reply, " I will not trouble you again, I will ask some one else, who I dare say will be more goodnatured than you are," and so saying he went out of the room, slamming the door vehemently after him, and Katie listened to his receding footsteps eagerly, hoping that he was on his way to the Refuge.

" Ursula will make it all right with him," she mused, but she heard him run up stairs to Leila's room, and then she laid her head upon the table and sobbed aloud. It was difficult to do what was right when the cost was Charlie's anger, and yet she never wavered from her purpose. She was too miserable to think, she did not know what to do,

and then she slipped down from her chair and said the LORD's Prayer very quietly, and when she rose from her knees, through all the misery there was just a little gleam of sunshine. "Just because it *is* so hard, I am sure it must be right," she mused, and that thought it was, that brought comfort to poor loving Katie's heart. She did not see Leila or Charlie again until they met in Ursula's room. She thought they both appeared to shun her, but she tried to be bright and cheerful, and when bed-time came she contrived to whisper to her brother, "Oh, Charlie, I am sorry."

"All right, Kittums, don't fret yourself."

Even then she was not happy, but when she got up on the morning of Christmas Eve, there was so much to be done and so much to think about, that she forgot all the sad feelings of the night before.



CHAPTER IV.

A GIRL'S FIRST GRIEF.

“Already in thy spirit thus divine,
Whatever weal or woe betide,
Be that high sense of duty still thy guide,
And all good powers will aid a soul like thine.”

SOUTHEY.

THERE was a hush upon the breakfast table at the Grange on the morning of Christmas Eve ; Mrs. Howard was not in her usual place ; the Squire had come down looking grave and anxious, and all he had said was, “Your mother is not very well this morning, my dears ; we must do our best without her.”

The brother and sisters did not ask any questions ; there was that upon their father’s face which prevented their doing so, but by degrees it came out that he had sent into Northminster for the doctor, and that their mother had not been well at the dinner party ; “just a little bit faint,” said Mr. Howard, in the tone that a man uses when he tries to convince himself of something that he knows is

not the case, "just a little bit faint ; she has been out of sorts for some time; Browne and a few tonics will set her to rights in a day or two."

The letters came in, and created a diversion ; there was one addressed to Leila : "the Heathcotes' invitation," she said, "for the day after to-morrow. I suppose I may write and accept, father?"

"Oh, yes, by all means, my dear. I don't like the set, but Heathcote is my lawyer, and it would not do to offend him."

Then Leila and Katie began a discussion upon dress, in the midst of which Charlie managed to slip away, bent upon an expedition to his mother's room.

Just as he reached the door however, his father's voice, raised in no very gentle tones, recalled him.

"I say, sir," he said, looking up from a letter he was reading, "I say, sir, what mischief have you been up to? come to me in a quarter of an hour in Ursula's room ; and in the mean time keep away from your mother, I cannot have her worried this morning."

Charlie looked crest-fallen and disappointed, and the girls wondered what had disturbed their father's equanimity in so unusual a manner.

"You must come with me to the Refuge now, Katie," said Mr. Howard ; "you are Charlie's friend, perhaps you can throw some light upon the letter."

With a heavy heart the girl followed her father

to Ursula's room ; then the full torrent of the Squire's wrath broke forth ; there was a letter from Dr. Sandford, Charlie had been breaking rules, going to the theatre on the sly, and spending more money than he could have come by lawfully ; several of the other boys were guilty of a similar offence, and the doctor was determined to sift the matter to the core.

"And now, Katie, have you disobeyed your mother's commands, and lent Charlie any money ?"

Poor Katie's face was alternately white and red, and Ursula feared, that tempted by her love for her brother, she might have yielded to his importunities ; she remembered how it had been with her and with Duncan in the years that now seemed so very long ago, how hard it had been for her to obey her father's and mother's commands.

"Speak, Katie," said Mr. Howard ; "do you know anything of this ?"

"Father, I have not lent Charlie any money, indeed, indeed I have not."

"Did he ask you for any ?"

"Oh, please—"

"Come, come, no putting me off. Did he ask you to lend him any money ?"

"Yes, father, I did ;" and Charlie stood before the Squire ; "I asked her last night, and she refused, because she said it was not right, she behaved like a brick ; I went to Leila then, and I got it out of her, and sent it off to the fellow who lent it me ; I am very sorry about it all, father, I know I have

been awfully wrong, and I'll write and confess all to the Head, and ask him to look over it this time, and I'll not break rules again, father, indeed I'll not, and please don't scold Leila."

It was impossible to look into the boy's honest face, and not see that he was very much in earnest, and Mr. Howard, who never could be really angry with any one for five consecutive minutes, was only too thankful to be able to say, "Well, well, we will say no more about it just now, as you've told the truth, and, besides it would not do to vex your mother at present, so we'll hush it up; but mind, sir, the next time I hear any such tales I'll disown you—take my word for that."

Charlie walked away, looking humble and subdued, and then Ursula said to Katie,

"It must have been hard to say no to him, dear."

"Yes; oh, Ursie, I was so miserable, it was only the thought of doing right without fearing what would come after, that helped me a little."

Ursula did not answer; she was vaguely anxious about her mother that morning; it was so strange not to have seen her, and yet to hear that she was up, lying on the sofa in her dressing-room, but she thought she had better keep quiet until she had seen the doctor. It was unlike Mrs. Howard to spare herself, and Ursula could not make it out.

The servant came with a message to summon Katie to her mother, and as Ursula watched her young sister out of the room, there came upon her a feeling of trust in the girl which she had never

known before ; "perhaps," she thought, "if there is trouble coming, Katie will be to the others what the eldest daughter and sister ought to have been, had God willed to give her the strength."

Katie's visit to her mother's dressing-room was a long one ; Mrs. Howard gave her some directions about household matters and ended up by saying, "if I should not be downstairs for a day or two, you will try and make them all comfortable, will you not, darling ? it is trying to be laid by at Christmas-tide, and yet," she added in a low reverent tone, "Christmas teaches us to bear the trial better, and to look forward to the great hope."

"I will do my best, mother dear," Katie answered simply, with a great dead weight at her heart.

"I am afraid Leila is too intent upon her new story to give much thought to puddings and pies," continued Mrs. Howard with a smile, "and so, dear, I trust all to you," and the mother smiled and stroked her child's golden hair.

Katie went to her own room ; she felt she could not go down stairs for a minute or two, there was such a strange choky feeling in her throat, she must drink a glass of water and try to send it away.

She stood for a moment before her new picture, and the kind loving Face of the Good Shepherd seemed to speak to her of comfort and hope ; then she began to put her room tidy, to dust the ornaments and books, as she had done for the last six

months, ever since three of the servants had been sent away. She was going down stairs when she remembered some small thing that she had left undone, and as she went back to do it, she sighed and said to herself, "I suppose it will always be like this, there will always be something to do, something to think about, all through one's life, I mean one can never feel that it is *quite* rest, because of all one's duties."

Then she looked up at her picture once more, and almost mechanically she read aloud the text which Margaret had illuminated for her only a few days before, "As thy day, so shall thy strength be;" and once more she thought of Ursula's words about doing what was right, and somehow the text seemed to tell her of the help that would come with the daily ceaseless round of duties, which must be a part of our life here.

Upon the staircase she met Charlie; the boy's eyes were so red that if Katie could have thought such a thing possible she would have said that he had been crying bitterly, but he always said crying was "made for women and girls; boys, after their first babyhood, had no tears."

"Katie," he said, "how is she?"

"She looks very pale, but she is quite bright and cheerful. Maria has just told me that Dr. Browne cannot come until the afternoon."

"Oh, Katie, I know I was awfully wrong last night, and I've been going wrong this last term at school; I did mean to have told it all to her, only

you see I was obliged to send off the money at once ; I want her to scold me, I want her to know how bad I've been ; it's harder to bear a great deal than if I were punished a hundred times over, and *she* knew it," and before Katie could make any attempts at comfort Charlie had run off, and she was quite sure this time that the tears were in his honest grey eyes.

The day wore on, differently to other days in some ways, and yet very much the same ; and in the afternoon Charlie and Leila went out for a walk, and Katie asked leave to stay at home just to look after her mother and Ursula in case they wanted anything. She took a book into the library and read until she could not see ; she heard Dr. Browne's carriage drive up to the door, she heard her father's hearty greeting of the good old man ; then there was a long conversation in the hall, and they went up to her mother's dressing-room together.

Katie sat on looking out dreamily into the fast gathering darkness, and then she fell asleep, her head resting against the window pane.

She was aroused by the sound of voices in the room ; her father and Dr. Browne were standing upon the hearth-rug, and the latter was saying, "Come, come, Squire, you must not be so down-hearted, you insisted upon hearing the truth, and perhaps it was better you should know it, because you see *she* is so fully aware of her state, it has been coming to her, she says, bit by bit, the con-

viction that she could never get well. It is no use to hold out any hope of ultimate cure, but this may go on for a long time ; with care and good nursing she may be spared to you for many months to come."

"Months,—and we have been married thirty years, and she has never spoken one cross or irritable word to me, although I must have tried her patience many and many a time," and the poor impetuous Squire leant against the mantelpiece and sobbed like a child.

Again Dr. Browne tried to comfort him. "For the children's sake you must be calm," he said, "it is *her* wish that they should know nothing about it, at least not just now ; she would not cast a shadow upon their Christmas joy."

Katie had heard and understood every word of that short conversation. She stood spell-bound, not able to move, bound by some strange horrible fascination, until the words came, "It is her wish that they should know nothing about it." Unintentionally she had played the eaves-dropper, and she knew something Mother did not wish her to know. She stepped forward into the firelight, and stood before her father and the doctor with a white scared look upon her young face.

"Katie, my child," said the Squire, "where have you been ? where have you come from ?"

"Father, forgive me, I did not mean it, indeed I did not ; I fell asleep after it was too dark to read, and I have heard every word you and Dr.

Browne said. I suppose I ought to have gone away, but I could not; but father," and Katie looked into the Squire's face bravely, "father, I will not tell the others, I will keep it all to myself."

"That's what I call a good girl," said Dr. Browne approvingly; "my dear, your mother is very ill, there is no doubt of that, something wrong about the heart, but she will be downstairs I hope to-morrow, and for a long time to come, only she never will be quite well again, we fear, not as she has been; you understand, do you not?"

"Yes, quite, thank you," and poor Katie smiled a sickly smile at the good old doctor's endeavours to re-assure her.

He took up his hat to go away, but he hesitated for a minute, and said,

"If you could keep up bravely before her, Miss Katie, it would be a great thing; it would pain her very much to think that this trouble had come to you at Christmas time."

"I will not say a word to her, indeed I will not."

"That is right, my dear, I feel you are to be trusted," and the good old doctor hustled off brushing his hand across his eyes, and saying to himself, "Poor little Miss Katie, I always said she was made of the real stuff, I saw it coming out at every turn, when she had the fever last year."

All through the after years of her life Katie remembered that Christmas Eve and that Christmas

Day. Every little event that happened stood out before her, and the central figure of all that strangely distinct picture was her mother lying on the sofa very pale, and sweet, and gentle, whilst the others, glad to have her amongst them again, with all their fears removed by her presence, laughed, and talked, and joked, and she joined in with their mirth, whilst that dull, heavy, terrible weight was at her heart.

There was comfort in the early service in the Cathedral on Christmas morning, when kneeling before the Altar, Katie asked for help to bear the burden that had come to her at Christmas-tide. She thought then of her mother's words spoken the day before,—“Christmas teaches us to bear the trial better, and to look forward to the great hope;” and when she stood with the others in the clear frosty air after the most solemn Service was over, giving and receiving Christmas greetings, there was only one amongst all those who knew “heedless harum-scarum Katie,” as she was often called, who saw that there was something on the girl's face that no one had ever seen there before ; and that one was Margaret Melville.

“Katie, dearest, is anything the matter?” she asked anxiously.

“Yes, a great deal ; mother is very ill, but I must not talk of it now even to you, I must keep up before the others, and a word would break me down.”

“Don't they know?”

"No, and they must not; oh, Margaret, if I might but go home with you, and tell you all."

"You cannot, I suppose?"

"No, it would not do; we must get home as fast as we can, and the others would wonder why I stayed behind."

"You will be at the Heathcotes' party to-morrow evening?"

Katie sighed. "Yes, I suppose I must go."

"We can have our talk then."

"Are *you* going, Margaret?"

The cold, grave, stiff look was on Margaret's face as she answered,

"Yes, I do not intend to let Blanche and Amy go *there* alone."

"Oh!"—and the "oh!" had in it a whole world of meaning—"anyhow I am glad you will be there, I shall like it better now."

It was a quiet Christmas Day at the Grange. Mrs. Howard went into Ursula's room in the afternoon, and Charlie and his sisters walked over to a Church two miles distant to Evensong and Carols; and still as Katie listened to the joyous songs, that told of the Birth of Him Who cannot alter, there came before her her mother's face with that sweet smile upon it, with which she had bid them good-bye.

It was her turn to help Mrs. Howard to bed that night, and she sat on with her afterwards, and talked of all kinds of things, and she saw the quiet tears rolling down the pale cheeks, and did not dare to notice them.

"Katie, my little one, don't look so anxious, I was only thinking of our dear ones who are far away, of our big boys, and of Duncan."

She pronounced the last name hesitatingly,—it was one that was never spoken now in the Grange, the younger ones had almost ceased to think of their eldest brother.

"I want to ask you something to-night, Katie, I want you to promise me to be kind and good to Duncan if—if he should ever come home."

"Dear mother, indeed I will."

"I know I can trust you, my child, I am afraid I, I mean we, may not see him for a very long time; it is seven years now since he went away, and we have never heard of him since. He did a great many wrong things, Katie dear, he was extravagant and wilful, and would not take advice; but I have always had a feeling that some day in some great extremity or trouble he would come home to us, and I want my little girl when that day comes to be a loving sister to him."

Katie could not answer; deep down in her heart lay the knowledge of why the seemingly strange request was made. She knew that the mother felt that she should never see her first-born again; she tried to speak, but words would not come, and at last she repeated what she had said before, "Dear mother, indeed I will."

"Thanks, my darling; now go down to the others."

There had been a time, oh, how many years ago

it seemed to Katie now, when she had prayed for all her brothers and sisters by name,—when Duncan's name had stood first on the list; it was very long since she had thought of him in that way, but on that Christmas night, after she had prayed for her mother, she asked GOD to bring Duncan home again to his father's house.



CHAPTER V.

FROM WINTER TO SUMMER.

“ GOD give us grace, to see His Face,
And meet our own in the happy place.”

DR. MONSELL.

MRS. Howard was very much better on the evening of the Heathcotes' party; there was such a bright colour in her cheeks, when the girls appeared in their white dresses and blue ribbons to be criticised by her and Ursula, and admired and envied by little Eva, that it was very hard for Katie to realise that that scene in the library only two days before was anything but a dream, a horrible startling dream from which she had now awakened.

“ After all,” she argued, “ doctors are not always right, old Widow Davies has been given over half-a-dozen times, and she actually walked up yesterday for her Christmas dinner,” and she went off to the party as happy and joyous as possible, looking forward to the talk with Margaret with more than ordinary pleasure.

"Leila is certainly our beauty," said Mrs. Howard to Ursula, as the door closed upon the young people, "but to my mind Katie's face is very sweet; it was always that, when she was quite a little child, but something has come to it lately, a look of strength that I never expected to see there."

"Yes," answered Ursula, "I have noticed it for a long time past, it seemed to begin at the time of her Confirmation, nothing of the childlike simplicity went away, but something was added to it, I can't quite tell what."

"The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of true might, the Spirit of knowledge, and—May it not be this, Ursula, that has wrought this change in our harum-scarum Katie?"

"Yes, mother dear, I have liked often to think that it was so; only two days since the child confided to me that she wanted to be a heroine. A year ago I should have laughed at the idea, now somehow all unconsciously to herself I feel that the wish may be realised, that our Katie with all a woman's weakness, and all a woman's strength, may bear the burdens of others, and sacrifice herself with real true heroism."

"Yes, dear, I think it may be so," and the mother sighed, for there came to her the thought of Katie bearing the burdens of others, when *her* watchful love should be withdrawn.

Then they talked of Leila, and there was something of sadness in the subject; the girl was undoubtedly unsatisfactory, but it was difficult to take

hold of any one thing in particular, and they could but hope and trust that time, and the discipline that must come sooner or later, would bring to light the many noble qualities that lay hidden beneath the indolence and self-will, which were Leila's stumbling-blocks.

Meanwhile, the party at the Heathcotes' was fast assembling, carriage after carriage rolled up to the door, and deposited the young guests there, and bright faces were to be seen, and joyous voices to be heard on all sides ; and the two fiddlers tuned their instruments, and a blind man with a cornet swelled out his cheeks, and sent forth the most sonorous notes, and boys and girls, and tiny children whirled round merrily to the sound of the music.

“Katie, you must dance with me a great many times,” said Harry Melville, coming forward to where Katie stood talking eagerly to Margaret, “it may be a very long time before we get such another chance.”

“Why,” answered Katie, “there may be some more parties during the holidays.”

“Ah, yes, but I shall not be here.”

Katie looked at Margaret. “What does he mean?” she said.

In a strained, unnatural voice the sister told her that in two days Harry was going away for a long time.

“My mother’s cousin, Lord Wentmore, is ambassador at Florence, he has offered to take Harry

as one of his attachés,—the letter came this morning, and father thinks it too good an offer to refuse, and Harry is wild with delight."

"And *you*, Margaret, what will you do without him?"

The words were thoughtlessly spoken and heartily repented of the next minute, when Katie saw the expression of intense agony that came upon her friend's face; but Margaret's voice was calm and steady as she answered,

"He likes the thought of it, and I think it will suit him, so long as he is happy I do not mind, but it *will* be hard to part with him, I own, he has been my help and stay for a long, long time."

"Margaret, you are more unselfish than most people."

Margaret only smiled and shook her head, and Harry came up to claim Katie as his partner, for the dance that was just then beginning, and the Dean's eldest daughter sat on in her lonely corner, watching the brightness of the scene, and thinking that never through all her youth had she known the pleasure those boys and girls were enjoying that night; once or twice she frowned and looked annoyed, for Vernon Heathcote was with Blanche more than she approved of, and yet she felt she had no power to stop the evidently fast growing intimacy.

There was nothing really wrong about it, nothing that she could take hold of,—young Heathcote was gentlemanly enough, and Blanche was remark-

ably quiet and ladylike, and yet the whole thing was especially distasteful to her, and she would have given anything in the world to find some legitimate excuse for taking her sister home. Amy was dancing away to her heart's content with every one who asked her, from old grey-haired Dr. Browne, to little Charlie Heathcote in black velvet and knickerbockers,—there was no fault to be found with her, except that she always blindly followed wherever Blanche led, and poor Margaret felt that somehow or other she had made some great mistake, and it was in vain that she tried to shut her eyes to the fact that every day estranged her young sisters' affections further from her.

There was something of rest in turning to look at Harry and Katie, and to feel that with those two all would be well; no actual plans for their future came into her mind, but still she liked to see them in all their bright fresh youthfulness, liked to think that she could trust them both, whatever might be in store for them, in the years that were to come.

She wondered what it was that had made Katie look so grave on Christmas morning, for now she was her own merry self, and Charlie's answer when he was asked how his mother was, had been "Ever so much better, thanks."

To the girl herself, Margaret had not spoken on the subject, she had left it for the quiet little talk they were to have some time or other during the evening.

"We will go into the conservatory, Margaret, please ; I think we shall be quiet there."

It was three hours later, the little ones had gone down to supper, and Margaret was feeling very tired and weary, when Katie's voice hoarse and trembling sounded on her ear.

"Margaret," she said, as they sat upon a couch amidst the sweet smelling flowers, "oh, Margaret, he told Mr. Heathcote more even than he told father ; he says it cannot be many months, it might be any day."

"Katie, I don't understand ; tell me what it all means."

Katie told her tale, beginning at her presence in the library on Christmas Eve, and saying word for word what she had heard there, "and to-day, Margaret, dear, she looked so much better, and I tried to think as Ursula, and Leila, and Charlie did, that she would soon be well, and I was so happy to-night ; and Harry left me standing in the hall, whilst he went to get me some lemonade, and again I heard what was not meant for me to hear. Mr. Heathcote asked how *she* was, and Dr. Browne said what I have told you, that before the summer came she would not be with us ; he said perhaps she would not get worse, but that it might be very sudden,—it might be, oh, Margaret, Margaret, I cannot bear it, he said it might be to-morrow."

Margaret could not speak ; she only drew the poor child more closely to her side, and called her

by all the endearing names she could think of ; and then after a long time she said,

“ Dearest, she is so good, and it will be such infinite rest.”

The tear-stained face was lifted now, and Katie made a poor little attempt at a smile as she answered,

“ Yes, I know that, and she has been tired and weary very often, although she has borne up so bravely.”

Then again there was silence, and once more Katie spoke,—

“ Will you find Harry, please, and tell him why it was I ran away as I did ? I dare say he is looking for me now.”

Margaret moved away, thinking it might be better to leave the girl alone, with her newly opened grief, for a few minutes, and when she returned, Harry was with her looking very grave and anxious.

“ Katie,” he said, “ I am so sorry, I wish now that I was not going away.”

“ So do I, Harry.”

There was not another word spoken, but Margaret saw a strange determined expression on the boy’s face, which set her off thinking for a long time ; and when she spoke to Katie again, it was with more than ordinary softness and tenderness : much as she had loved the girl ever since her illness, she resolved to watch over her and cherish her now for Harry’s sake.

There was no more dancing for poor Katie that

night ; she pleaded a bad headache as an excuse to go and sit by the fire in the bedroom, and when Leila and Charlie alternately appeared at the door to see how she was, she answered them as cheerfully as she could, and bade them run down and enjoy themselves, for they must not keep the horses waiting a minute when they came, father had particularly said so to her, before they came down into Ursula's room.

To her it was intense relief when the carriage really was announced ; and Margaret and Harry stood in the hall to bid her good-night.

“I will come to the Grange the day after to-morrow, dearest ; I hope your mother will be well enough to see me.”

“Oh, yes, she is sure to be,” and then came the terrible remembrance of Dr. Browne's words, and the blinding tears rushed to poor Katie's eyes.

“It is really good-bye, I am afraid,” said Harry, “for a long, long time ; but, Katie, if there is anything in the whole world that I can do for you, you'll be sure to let me know.”

“Yes,” and then with a violent effort at politeness she added, “I hope you will like Florence, and that you will come back before very long.”

“Maria, how is mother ?” was her first question as the sleepy servant opened the door to admit them on their return to the Grange.

“Law, Miss Katie, how you frightened me ; why she's quite nicely, miss, or rather she was when she went to bed three hours ago.”

"That is right, I only wanted to know," and she took the candle and went up to her own room, leaving Leila and Charlie to follow more leisurely.

"I say, Katie's very odd," said the boy, "what is the matter with her, Leila?"

"Why, don't you know she has a headache?" was the somewhat hasty answer, "she is tired, I suppose, she will be all right in the morning."

But Charlie was not satisfied, and the next minute he was knocking at Katie's door.

"I say, Kittums, what's up? you are not yourself, let me help you," and Charlie's arm was thrown roughly round his sister's waist.

The simple act of affection was more than she could stand; she sat down on the bed and sobbed as though her heart were breaking.

Charlie was fairly puzzled, and at last a gleam of light dawned upon him.

"I say," he said, in mysterious tones, "I know what it is."

"Oh, Charlie, how have you guessed it?"

"Never mind, but just say it's true."

"It's true that I overheard what Dr. Browne said, but I don't know how you can know anything about it."

"Dr. Browne! what on earth has he to do with it? Why, Katie, aren't you crying because Harry is going away? Girls always do cry about everything."

Katie tossed back her head indignantly, and the slight effort roused her from her misery.

“No,” she said, “it is not that, nothing of the kind ; it is something that I cannot tell you.”

But Charlie was not to be put off. The mention of Dr. Browne’s name had roused his suspicions, and with a quiet, manly air he laid his hand upon Katie’s arm, and said,

“If it is anything about mother, I have as much right to know it as you have.”

She was too wretched to be cautious, and all the impetuous nature burst forth as she answered,

“Why should you be made as miserable as I am?”

“Katie, tell me the truth.”

She laid her head upon his shoulder and told her story, and he listened without question or comment, only at the last, putting his hands before his face, whilst a great deep sigh, that was almost a sob, came from the depths of the honest boyish heart.

“Charlie, the others must not know it, it is her wish ; it would only make Ursula ill, and would do no good to Leila. It was only accidentally that I found it out, and you have dragged it from me.”

“Katie, Katie, I’ll do my best at school next term. I shan’t like to have done one single thing that must be kept from her when I come home in the summer.”

And Katie felt, although she could not put it into words, that the trouble that had come at Christmas time was already doing its work.

They wished each other good-night silently, the

hearts of both were very full, and Katie as she looked at her picture and at the piece of shining holly which stood over it, thought of the words of the Dean's sermon on Christmas morning, "Even amid the outward tokens of our great joy, there seems to come to us a shadow of sorrow, something of the darkness of the Cross dims the brightness of the Manger; the holly leaves, with their shining red berries, tell us their own tale of distant but most sure suffering.

"For the spiked leaves surely bring to our mind the crown of thorns, and the blood-red berries are emblems of those most precious drops of blood which fell from the SAVIOUR's brow; and if the hearts of any of us are sad just now, if trouble is near us, and about us at this glad Christmas-tide, let us not sorrow as those without hope, for He is born in Bethlehem who has turned all our sadness into gladness."

Poor Katie said her prayers and went to bed, and was soon fast asleep, half worn out with mingled excitement and sorrow.

All through the Christmas holidays there was very little outward change in the life at the Grange. Things went on just as they had done before Mrs. Howard was considered an invalid. She was able to be downstairs every day, to sit in Ursula's room as usual, and to manage the housekeeping as she had always done.

It was only in little things that those who knew the truth could see a difference.

When poor Charlie went back to school at the end of January, she was not as usual standing in the porch to see him drive off. He had bidden her good-bye in Ursula's room, and he had come back looking pale and grave, and had whispered in her ear,

“Mother dear, I will not do one thing all this term to make you sorry.”

“God help you, my boy,” was the earnest, fervent answer, and the mother was thankful that ever so gently, as it seemed to her, they were all learning to see how things were, learning, it might be, to do without her.

It was Katie who was her help and prop in those days. She marvelled more and more at the change that had come over the girl; marvelled and was thankful; and so she waited quietly and trustfully until God should send and take her from the earthly home where she was so loved, to what she humbly hoped would be rest and peace.

Dr. Browne had been right in the opinion he had given Mr. Howard regarding her state. When the summer came she was with her husband and her children still, thankful to hear from Charlie's own lips that “the Head” had called him into his room just before he left school, and told him to tell his mother that he had not a fault to find with anything but his spelling, “and that will never come right,” the boy added, with burning cheeks, “it's all humbug, why cannot words be spelt as they're pronounced?”

The sweet summer days passed on, and very early one morning the Dean went to the Grange as he often did now, to celebrate the Blessed Sacrament in the little Oratory.

They carried Ursula there for the first time. It had always been the Dean's habit to go to her every week in her own room, but Mrs. Howard had expressed a wish that this time it might be otherwise, and Ursula, generally afraid of venturing upon anything new, strongly urged that the experiment should be tried.

In all the years that came afterwards there was not one of them who did not remember that most holy service. The sunshine coming in through the little painted windows, falling upon the mother's head like a glory, as she knelt in her own place, looking so bright and well.

They all of them thought most of *her*, even Ursula was a secondary consideration on that July morning.

The Dean stayed to breakfast, and said he thought he had never seen Mrs. Howard looking better.

"Yes," she said, in her sweet, grave way, "I *am* very well; it almost seems wrong to ask you to come out here. I felt this morning as though I could quite have gone to the Cathedral, but Dr. Browne is peremptory about the least exertion, and for their sakes, I suppose, it is right to be obedient and to run the risk of seeming lazy."

The Dean smiled.

"No one could ever accuse you of that," he said.

"I don't know. Sometimes lately I have so longed for rest, I have thought that the craving has been too great."

"God grant it you, my child, in His own good time, more perfect, more entire than aught of which you can ever have dreamed."

She bent her head, and he gave her his blessing, and as he passed out from the old Grange into the sweet summer air, there was a strange foreboding in his mind that he should never see its mistress again in this world.

The foreboding was realized. Ere the July day had closed, the loving wife and mother had been called away.

She had gone to lie down as usual for an hour before dinner, and when her husband went to summon her, he saw her all still and quiet, her face upon her arm, turned to where the rays of the setting sun were falling in all their brightness upon the distant hills.

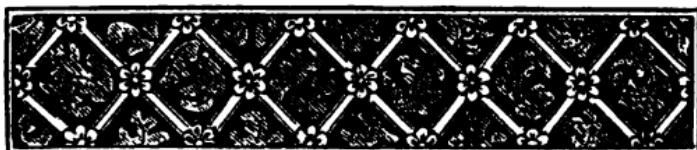
"Ursula," he cried, "oh, Ursula, speak to me."

But there was no answer, and Mr. Howard knew that his loving, faithful wife had gone to the rest for which she so longed.

How one by one they all of them heard the terrible truth we need not tell here. How God in His mercy softened the hard blow, only those can realize who have experienced it, who have learned

to bless the chastening Hand, laid upon them in very love.

Truly she was taken from them, and her place knew her no more. There had been little preparation; even Mr. Howard, and Katie, and Charlie who seven months before had known the worst, had learned to live on from day to day gaining fresh hope. There had been no actual illness, little or no visible suffering; she left behind her the remembrance of herself, as she had ever been. She had never complained of anything but of being tired, and now they could think of her at rest, and sorrow for her, but not as those without hope.



CHAPTER VI.

“A FINE HEROINE INDEED.”

“The trivial round, the common task
Will furnish all we ought to ask,
Room to deny ourselves, a road
To bring us daily nearer GOD.”

Christian Year.

THREE years have passed away, and once more it is Christmas-tide, and the wintry wind is blowing through the leafless trees at the old Grange. There are not so many trees as there were on that evening when Katie and Charlie and old Thomas drove up the avenue in the dog-cart ; a good deal more timber has been cut down since then, it may have been because Mr. Howard thought it an improvement ; if he did, he stood alone in his opinion, for every one else said that the once beautiful place was fast going to ruin.

And in truth it was, the flower-garden that once had been “the Mistress” delight was all overgrown with weeds, the shrubbery with its once trim walks was now a kind of maze in its wild con-

fusion ; and poor loyal old Thomas, who had but a little pony to groom now, was always to be seen trying to improve things a little, tying up a twig here, and a branch there, to get things in order for the new gardener, (a mythical functionary, by the way,) who of course never appeared.

“ You see, Mrs. Stubbs,” he remarked to the cook, “ the place can’t fail to go to ruin if that chap the new gardener stays away much longer ; there’s Miss Ursula, poor dear, as can’t attend to the garden, and Miss Leila is always a-writing of her verses, and little Miss Katie, why she’s here and there and everywhere, the Master’s slave, and every one else’s servant ; and *geriniums* and *hilitriopes* is very fine things, Mrs. Stubbs, but they ain’t good to eat, so I looks after the cabbages and taters, and the other things will be made to grow up in no time, when the new man comes.”

Thomas’ account of the family was a pretty true one ; money troubles had been crowding upon the Squire ever since his wife’s death. Ursula lying upon her couch, and seeing things more clearly perhaps than it is given to the strong and healthy to see them, could be thankful from the depths of her heart that her gentle mother had been taken to her rest before all the new difficulties, brought on by old speculations and imprudence, came upon the home she had loved so well. And Leila still wrote poems and novels, which were never of course published, and Katie, sweet bright Katie, was everything to them all, not one of them could

have done without her, least of all her fractious, irritable father.

For a great change had come upon Mr. Howard since that July day when his wife was taken from him ; he had had a stroke of paralysis not many months afterwards, and although to the world he seemed to have recovered, those about him knew that he was very different to what he had been in the old days.

He very seldom spoke even to Ursula about the state of his affairs ; but they all of them saw how things were,—they saw the noble trees cut down one by one, they felt the daily difficulty of getting any money. It was poor Katie's duty to pay the weekly bills, and oh, how she dreaded those Monday mornings when she had to take in the books and ask for the means wherewith to settle them.

"My dear, leave them until next week ;" and sometimes she had to do so, and when the time came she had a harder battle than ever to fight, and she made up her mind that she would not be put off on another occasion.

And then there were those long talks with Mr. Heathcote in the library, from which poor Mr. Howard used to come looking so terribly distressed, it used to go to Katie's heart to see her father then.

"Oh, Margaret, if I could but help him," she would say to her friend ; "I feel I am so utterly useless."

“ My dear, I only wish I had your power of comforting others.”

“ Don’t laugh at me, Margaret.”

“ I am not doing so, I am in real sober earnest; there is not one of them at home who could do without you; ask Blanche and Amy whether they could spare me?”

There was bitterness in the tone, and the old hard look was upon Margaret’s face still. Those three years had not improved her relations with her young sisters; they were quite young ladies now, going out a great deal, and choosing their own friends, and revelling in their freedom, as most girls do.

Harry was at Florence; he had only been to England once during all that time, and then not to Northminster; the Dean had been ill, and had been ordered to the sea, and the young attaché had joined them there, and then gone straight back to his post.

“ He sent you his love and this little statuette of the Holy Family, and he was as good—ay, better than ever;” and this was all Margaret had said to Katie. This was all that she had heard of Harry since that wretched night when they had parted in the Heathcotes’ Hall; he seemed almost to have faded out of her memory, he belonged to the old bright childish days, which seemed to have gone for ever. For Katie’s young life was very full of burdens, she had hardly time for any intercourse with the Deanery; there were snatches of

conversation sometimes with Margaret after the Services, but she generally had to hurry home to her father and Ursula ; and the Dean's daughter marvelled sometimes as she thought of the weak yielding child, and looked at the grave, thoughtful, practical girl.

And yet there were times when some of the old sunny manner showed itself,—glimpses of the harum-scarum Katie of old,—but this was only when Charlie was at home ; he was her shadow still, and her happiest days were those summer and winter holidays when he could be with her all day long.

Now he was *grinding* for the army. To be a soldier had been the dream of his life, and no one had told him that perhaps it would be better if he turned his thoughts to some other profession ; his father had not the moral courage to do it, and neither Ursula nor the others knew much about the matter.

Little Eva was still the sunshine of the house ; she would most assuredly have been spoiled had she not been the sweetest, most loving little maiden it was possible to see ; growing more like her mother every day, with just that same look in her eyes, that they all remembered so well on that last morning in the little Oratory.

There was unusual stir and bustle in the Refuge. The three sisters were sitting in council, Charlie trying in vain to read at a side-table, Eva flitting about hither and thither, and arraying herself in

some old white dresses and flowers that stood in a heap upon the floor.

On Ursula's couch was a blue silk skirt, old-fashioned but handsome, and it was over this that the girls were bending, and talking very fast about breadths and puffs, and all the technical terms which to Charlie's unpractised ear sounded very incomprehensible.

"No, I will not have it unless something can be found for Katie," said Leila authoritatively.

"Nonsense, Leila dear, of course I should enjoy it, but there is no special attraction for me, nobody will care whether I am there or not."

Leila coloured crimson, and there was just the slightest tinge of self-consciousness in her voice as she answered,

"How do you know that any one will care whether *I* am there?"

Katie did not pursue the subject, she did not know much about her sister's affairs, but she had heard hints dropped from Leila herself about a certain young cornet of dragoons, who was stationed at Northminster, and who evidently had lost his heart to the dark-eyed beauty.

"Very well, I consider it settled that you *are* to go, don't you, Ursie?"

Ursula looked grave and more sorrowful than the occasion seemed to warrant as she answered,

"Yes, I think you really must, Leila, it would hardly do to waste two tickets after Lady Fortescue's kindness in sending them."

"Charlie can have mine," said Katie, eagerly ; "you would like it, wouldn't you, Carlo?"

"Not without you, Kittums ; no one would take pity upon me and dance with me ; at the Fortescues' the other evening I heard one young lady aged about sixteen, put me down as 'an awkward unfledged cub ;' true, perhaps, but none the more flattering ; no, if you don't grace the county ball with your presence, I shall not ; why, what on earth do you want to wear? look at all those things in the corner," pointing to the heap of tumbled muslin which Eva found so attractive, "why can't you sew some of that finery together, and make yourself a frock?"

"Simply because it is dirty finery, Charlie, and I would rather stay at home than go in that, —please," she added in a lower tone, "say no more about it, it pains Ursula so, and indeed, indeed, Charlie, it cannot be managed ; that blue dress is one that was had for *her* years and years ago ; we have worn all the others, but she had some feeling about this one ; I believe it was, that Harvey chose it, and liked it ; however, she would have it brought out for Leila or for me to-day ; and it is but fair that the elder should have it."

Charlie looked very rueful, and dived down into the depths of his pockets.

"Look here, Kittums, this is all I have in the world, six shillings, would it go any way towards getting you any ball toggery?"

"My dear old boy, you don't understand all that

I should want for my 'coming out' dress, remember I have never been to a ball, never even to a children's party, since that night at the Heathcotes' three years ago,—I have neither shoes nor gloves, nothing to fall back upon in fact, so just put your money into your pocket, and all silly thoughts out of your head, and believe me I shall be very happy at home."

"That's all very fine, you are always happy when you are a martyr ; do you know really I sometimes think you may have your wish and be a heroine ; do you remember how we used to talk about it in the old days ? But, joking apart, Katie, this is an awful bore ; for I should like to have gone with you, and it would have been so jolly to be there with Harry."

"With Harry ? what do you mean ?"

"Oh, I forgot, no one thought he would be home until February, but I met the Dean in Northminster this morning, and he tells me they expect him next Thursday, the very day of the ball."

Katie did not answer ; she walked to the corner where the old, discarded dresses lay, and as Leila went out of the room carrying the blue silk with her, and Charlie challenged Eva to a game at battledore and shuttlecock, she took up the freshest and cleanest looking of them all, and stood before Ursula.

"I don't think this would be bad, Ursie."

"My darling, indeed it would be ever so much too short ; I cannot see any way of lengthening it,"

and Ursula turned away to hide the tears that *would* come, as she noticed her young sister's evident disappointment.

“If only I had not promised that sovereign that the boys sent from Australia, to poor old Widow Davies to pay her rent,” she said, “that would have gone a long way; but she must not be disappointed, and I do not see any way of getting another; it would not do to ask father just now.”

“No, most certainly not,” answered Katie, rising up to the occasion, “it was hard to get what I wanted for the books this morning, and Simpkins is getting impatient; I could not spend one shilling upon myself just now, it would not be right. I had thought, if we could have managed the dress part, that the gloves and shoes might just have been possible, but after all it is best as it is, one extravagance might have led to another, and so long as Leila is happy—and I think she is—you must not trouble about me.”

“My little one, how can I help it?”

There was inexpressible tenderness in the tone, and Katie knelt by her sister's couch and hid her burning face on her shoulder.

“Ursula, I am ashamed of myself; I did not think I could have cared so much about such a little disappointment. A fine heroine indeed! you remember my old wish; Charlie just recalled it to me, I had almost forgotten it in the trivial round, the common task of this work-a-day world,” and Katie ran away to hide all the “rubbish,” as she

called it, in the garret from which she and Leila had ferreted it out that morning.

“And yet the trivial round and the common task, fulfilled as you fulfil them, Katie,” soliloquised Ursula, “offer more opportunities of self-denial than you seem to dream of, in all your sweet unselfishness and thought for all of us.”



CHAPTER VII.

AT THE BALL.

“ And thus thy soul shall learn to draw
Sweetness from out that loving law,
That sees no failure and no flaw,
Where all is good. And life is good,
Were the one lesson understood,
Of its most sacred brotherhood.”

THE County Ball was the great public event of the year in Northminster—looked forward to by the younger members of society with much delight, discussed beforehand, commented on afterwards ; in fact, its reminiscences and expectations formed the topic of conversation for all the twelve months of the year.

Even Margaret Melville was interested in it ; and Blanche and Amy remarked that on this occasion when she heard that Harry was coming home, she was much excited, and actually took some trouble about her own attire. She was walking quickly down the principal street of the city on the afternoon of the day on which there had been

the discussion in "the Refuge," and she saw Leila and Katie coming towards her.

"You have heard the news!" was her first greeting; "Harry will be at home for the ball."

"Yes; Charlie told us of it this morning."

"And you are busy to-day getting your dresses ready; is it not so, Leila?"

"I am matching some trimming," answered Leila, "but I am sorry to say that Katie is not doing anything; she is not coming."

"Not coming! impossible, Katie."

"Quite possible, Margaret, dear, and quite true."

"Why, there must be a reason?"

Margaret was not a gossip, and never encouraged it in others; she knew that monetary affairs at the Grange were not in a very flourishing condition, but perhaps she was more ignorant than any one in all Northminster of the true state of the case; and she had not a notion that things were really so bad, or that the Squire's debts and difficulties were common talk; so she pursued the subject somewhat mercilessly: "You don't like leaving Ursula and your father, but I am sure if they knew it, they would be the first to urge you to come."

"No, it is not that;" and Katie drew herself up with just a little air of the pride that was a tradition in the Howard family; "do not give me credit for what I do not deserve; it is because we are poor, too poor to afford a new dress, and there is not an old one in the house that can be turned to account," and the girl laughed, a would-be bright

merry laugh, in which however, Margaret detected just a little touch of disappointment.

"They *will* make me go," said Leila, apologetically; "Ursula has given me a blue silk of hers; indeed, Margaret, I wanted Katie to have it."

"I am sure you did, dear; but you must take the elder sister's right this time," and Margaret smiled, a very bright smile indeed for her, and Katie felt just a faint twinge of disappointment. "Margaret does not seem to care whether I go to the ball or not," she said to Leila, as they walked homewards.

"I suppose she has no thought but for Harry just now," was the consolatory answer, "but, Katie, indeed I wish from my heart that you would take my place."

"No, it's all settled now; I was quite happy until we met Margaret; if she would only have been a little bit sorry I should not have cared."

"Ah, it's the way of the world," said Leila, gloomily; "self, self, self, and nothing else."

"But it's not Margaret's way, she always wants me to enjoy myself; I cannot make her out."

"My dear, don't try it; time will solve the enigma."

And time did solve it, although not at all in the way Leila had thought it would.

It was the evening before the ball, Mr. Howard was having his after-dinner nap, the girls and Charlie were in Ursula's room, when there was heard a bustle in the passage, then came a knock at the

door, and Thomas appeared, his face all one glow of honest delight, carrying in his arms a huge cardboard box.

“Miss Katie, it’s for you. Arnold, from the Deanery, has just brought it out, miss, with this letter.”

“For me! no, surely there is some mistake.”

“Read the writing for yourself, miss, here it is. I saw Arnold myself, and I told Maria I’d bring the box to you; it was most too large for her to carry,” and the faithful old servant chuckled with delight, as he laid the huge parcel triumphantly on the table.

Then there was a hush of expectation; Ursula just as anxious as the younger ones.

“Give me a pair of scissors, give me a knife; this string will not come unfastened,” exclaimed Charlie.

“Oh, do take care,” from Katie; “this morning I was half an hour looking for a piece of string.”

“Never mind, Kittums, don’t look; just read your letter—you seem to have forgotten it.”

“Yes; what a shame of me!” and she opened the envelope, and then a little cry of delight escaped her: “oh, Ursula, look,” and Ursula held out her hand, and read the note aloud.

“DEAR KATIE,

“I have long wanted to give you something you want, so you must accept the accompanying

dress for my sake, and wear it to-morrow evening. We will send the carriage for you.

“Your loving

“MARGARET.”

“Now then, look, all of you,” and Charlie held up the pretty white dress with its clusters of lilies of the valley, and shining leaves, for general admiration. “How beautiful, how lovely,” exclaimed Ursula and Leila in the same breath, but Katie did not speak, her heart was too full for words; she was bitterly self-reproachful too, at having wronged Margaret that afternoon they had met in North Street.

“I don’t deserve it,” she said at last, “and look here, here are shoes and gloves, and a fan—two fans, one for you, Leila; here is your name on it; she has not forgotten one single thing: oh, how can I thank her?”

“By looking as well and happy as you can to-morrow evening, darling,” answered Ursula, “by putting aside home cares for once, and enjoying yourself thoroughly.”

“Yes, I’ll try; and that dress looks made for enjoyment, does it not?”

“Ursula,” said Charlie, the next evening, as he appeared in his sister’s room, drawing on a pair of white kid gloves, “Ursula, I’ll tell you a secret.”

“Well, Charlie, what is it?”

“Why, our Kittums has turned into a real beauty, there’s no mistake about it.”

"I have thought it for a long time, Charlie."

"Have you though? well, I did not know it until five minutes ago, when I just took a peep into her room, to see if she was dressed—she did not see me though, she was standing before that picture of the Good Shepherd that Harry gave her ever so long ago; and do you know, Ursie, she looked just like that likeness of mother that father has in the study, and you know *she* was the belle of the county."

The next minute Leila and Katie appeared; the one, tall, dignified, and stately, with braids of raven hair coiled round her small shapely head, an aigrette of rare pearls, her only ornament; the other, a bright winsome-looking maiden, with a sweet face, and golden hair, and a pure loving light shining in her grey eyes, as she stood with Leila before Ursula, and heard her say to Charlie,

"I think you may be proud of your sisters to-night, sir; give them safely into Lady Fortescue's keeping, and get as much dancing as you can for yourself, Charlie."

There was one more good-night to be said—to their father in the dining-room; he was half asleep when they went in, and he started up and looked wonderingly at Katie.

"Ursula," he said, "Ursula, where have you been?"

"Father dear, it is Katie."

"My child, I did not know you, you looked as your mother looked the first night I ever saw her."

Katie stooped to kiss him, and whispered, "Ask for me that I may be as good as she was."

He turned Leila round and admired her, but his last look was for Katie in her pure white dress, and the wreath of lilies in her hair.

The ball that night was a great success, the greatest that had been known for some time ; every one was in good spirits, every one seemed pleased, and the 120th Dragoons were essentially a dancing Regiment, and contributed much to the enjoyment of the young ladies.

And no one in all the room was happier than Kate Howard.

"Katie," she had heard a deep, manly voice say, as she stood in the lobby, "I may have the first dance, may I not?"

She looked up at the speaker, and started : there was the same honest, English face, the same blue eyes which she had last seen at the Heathcotes' party three years before ; but Harry was a boy then, a merry, thoughtless boy ; now he was a man, with an expression of strength and determination upon his young face, and something about the lithe active figure that told of no common energy and life.

"Harry," she said simply, "I am so glad to see you ; yes, I will dance with you, I am not engaged ; indeed I know no one, I leave all the triumphs to Leila : have you seen her ? is she not beautiful ?" and then she blushed, and said, "I beg your pardon, I ought not to have said it of my sister."

"You may say anything you like to me, Katie,—yes, she is very lovely, so that young cornet of Dragoons seems to think."

"I suppose it is Mr. Norton; I never saw him before; Leila has been out to two or three parties, but this is my first ball."

He led her off to join the dancers, and soon they were talking just as they used to talk in the old times, about Margaret, and Ursula, and the Dean, and the Squire. Then when the dance was over, and they went into a more quiet room, set apart for loungers, she told him of her mother, of the peaceful, quiet going home on that bright summer's day. Afterwards he spoke of his life in the gay Italian city, and she saw that the Harry of old was unchanged, that the truthful, honest nature of the boy had kept him loyal to his home teaching, through all those years of absence.

"How long shall you be at home?" she asked.

She could not account for the flush that rose to his cheek as he answered,

"It is very uncertain. I have to run up to town to-morrow; I have had the offer of a post in India, which looks tempting. I think it may suit me better than diplomacy."

"It is very far away."

"Not so far as it was; at least steamers, and telegraph wires, and new routes seem to have brought it quite near home. But, Katie, nothing is settled. I shall have to ask some one else's advice before I make up my mind to accept it."

" Margaret ? she will never give her consent to it I am sure."

" Not Margaret ;" and he looked at her with an expression upon his face that even she in her simplicity could not fail to understand, and said, " Katie, when I come back from London my first visit will be to the Grange."

He did not say any more, and they were both of them very silent after that short conversation. They danced together once or twice again, but still there was a reserve between them, and yet Katie's face wore its brightest look, and Harry smiled proudly as he passed Margaret, and saw her looking lovingly at him and his partner.

Poor Margaret, she had her own special worries and troubles that night. Vernon Heathcote was at home for the first time for months. She had hoped that the "nonsense" of his boyish days was at an end, but she saw now that he was more devoted to Blanche than ever, and she could hardly bear to think of what the end of it all might be. She watched the two pass out of the ball-room on the terrace of the hotel where the ball was held.

Blanche had had a cough for months, which had caused them all some anxiety, and Margaret took up a shawl, which she had brought into the room, and followed them out into the cold night air.

" Blanche," she said, going up to where the girl stood with Vernon Heathcote's arm round her waist, " Blanche, are you mad ?"

Blanche turned round angrily, whilst young

Heathcote stood aside with a cynical sneer upon his face.

"Mad! no, I was never more sane in my life."

Margaret threw the shawl round her, and drew her arm within hers.

"I must take her back to the ball room, Mr. Heathcote," she said, with studied politeness, "she has not been well for some time."

Vernon stepped forward as though to offer his arm, then he seemed to think better of it. Margaret saw a glance which she could not mistake exchanged between her sister and the young man, and she turned to Blanche and said,

"You must explain this strange conduct to father to-morrow."

"I am quite willing to do so; I will explain it to you to-night if you please, when we get home."

"Very well. We must soon be thinking of going. I promised father not to stay later than two o'clock, and we have to send the carriage back for the Grange people."

Two o'clock came, and Margaret went up to Amy and told her they must not stay any longer. The merry girl pleaded in vain for one more dance, but the elder sister was inexorable, and Blanche looked weary and dispirited, and said she did not care to stay.

Harry said he should wait to put the Grange party into the carriage, and then walk home, so Margaret entered the Deanery with the two girls, outwardly, calm and stiff as usual, whilst a deep,

dull weight of some evil foreboding, lay at her heart.

There was a bright fire burning in the library, and Blanche opened the door and walked in first, making a sign to the others to follow her. Not a sound was heard for a minute but the ticking of an old clock which stood on a pedestal in a distant corner of the room. Then Margaret spoke in her hardest and most chilling tones,

“Blanche, after what I saw to-night, I must speak to father in the morning. It is for you to choose whether you will give me your explanation first.”

“I told you I should, when we came home.”

Margaret glanced at Amy, as though to hint to her that she was not wanted.

Blanche saw the look.

“Let her stay,” she said, “she knows everything ; I have no secrets from *her*.”

“Everything ! no secrets from *her* ! Blanche, tell me at once what are the secrets. What is there to know ?”

“Not very much perhaps you will think after all ; simply that I have been engaged to Vernon Heathcote for months.”

The tone was indifferent, but the girl’s face was deadly pale, and there was a quivering of the lip which betokened that there was some feeling hidden somewhere, hard though it was to detect it in Blanche’s manner. Neither of the girls were prepared for the effect the announcement would

have upon their sister; never all through their lives had they seen her look as she looked now.

"Oh, mother," she murmured, "I have failed in my trust, and yet God knows how hard I have tried to do, as you would have had me do."

Then in her agony, she laid her head upon the table, and low convulsive sobs shook her whole frame.

"Margaret, don't, please don't," said Amy, "I am very sorry about it; I wanted Blanche to tell you over and over again, but she said you would be cross and unsympathetic, and prevent their corresponding and meeting, and Vernon would not hear of your knowing about it."

Margaret lifted up her head, and even Blanche was frightened when she looked into her face.

"Yes," she said, "I have been cross and unsympathetic; at least, *you* say so, but what about father? Who as gentle and as good as he? Oh, Blanche, my child, you have deceived him."

Blanche's coldness and indifference vanished now. She loved her father with all the love of a nature which in spite of all appearances to the contrary was deep, and strong, and earnest, and it was in a broken, trembling voice that she answered,

"Vernon was to have spoken to him to-morrow, in any case."

"Perhaps so, but what about all the deceit of months, the correspondence, to which Amy has acknowledged, all of which must have been going on since he left last Easter?"

Blanche could say nothing. She took up her

candle, and kissed her sister's forehead, and walked out of the room, leaving Margaret and Amy alone.

"Margaret," said the girl again, "indeed, indeed I am sorry. I see now how wrong it was."

"Wrong! Oh, Amy, it is too dreadful to think about. Both of you going to Holy Communion as you have done, with all this great weight of deceit upon your hearts."

Amy was kneeling at her sister's feet now, crying bitterly.

"I see it all now," she said, "all the wrong doing that I did not see before. Margaret, do you know it began a long, long time ago, almost in fun, to—to—"

"To what?" said Margaret. "Don't be afraid of speaking out, Amy; there cannot surely be worse to hear, than I have heard already."

"To vex you," answered poor Amy, hiding her face in Margaret's lap. "They, I mean we, used to laugh at the way you used to watch us, and try to keep us away from people, and I think that is how it began; and then it went on, until last Easter Vernon spoke to Blanche, and told her he cared for her more than for any one in the world."

"My poor little Amy," and Margaret stooped and gave her young sister a more loving kiss than she had ever given her before. "My poor little Amy, I can see my mistake now that it is too late; but, my dear, I have loved you both better than my life."

Amy realized *that* now ; it came to her with a strange new light, and she could look upon the years that had passed, and remember all the untiring devotion, all the thought and care that had been spent on them. She thought too of Margaret's goodness to others, of her real charity, of her many unselfish self-denying acts, and there came upon the girl a feeling of most bitter self-reproach for the part she had taken against her very often, especially during the last nine months.

"Margaret, will you forgive me ?" she said humbly.

"Dear child, I ought to ask to be forgiven for the mistake I have been making for fourteen long years."

"Oh, Margaret, you have been very good."

"There is such a thing as disagreeable goodness," answered poor Margaret, with a bitter smile. "I own I have tried, but how I have failed, the events of this evening have proved. And now, dear child, you must go to bed."

Amy gave her sister another kiss, and walked away ; then she came back and said,

"Magsie, will you ask that I may be helped in trying to be better ?"

"My darling, I have asked it every day, many times a day, for you and for Blanche."

"And you will not leave it off because we have deceived you ?"

"No, indeed ; but, Amy, you must pray too for me, that I may be more gentle and loving."

Amy did not answer, she only looked wonderfully into her sister's face, and Margaret could not but feel that she had gained a higher place in the girl's affections in those last five minutes, than she had been able to win, in all those weary struggling years.

She sat on by herself in the library, waiting for Harry; a talk with him would be her greatest comfort now; and she could not but feel a shrinking dread of the morrow, and of the effect that Vernon Heathcote's communication might have upon her father; for he had never liked the young man, and of late strange rumours had come to Northminster of the wild life he was leading in town, and Margaret knew how the Dean would shrink from trusting Blanche's happiness into his hands.

"And but for me it might all have been different," she mused, as she dwelt in bitterness of spirit upon all the events of those past years.

She heard Harry's footstep, and went to the door to meet him.

"Not in bed yet, Magsie! you should not have waited for me," and his bright joyous face was a strange contrast to her sad one.

"I wanted to speak to you, Hal; something has happened."

"What is it?—is any one ill?"

"No, it is about Blanche."

"Nothing to do with that fellow Heathcote, has it?"

“Yes, indeed it has,” and Margaret told all she knew, and then she said, “Do you remember in this very room four years ago, telling me that I tried too hard to keep Blanche and Amy in order?”

“Yes, but I cannot see what that has to do with this disgraceful behaviour.”

“Simply that it is the result of my bringing up.”

“No, no, Magsie, I cannot allow that, you have been a slave to them, have sacrificed yourself to them in every way; you never had any girlhood, Margaret, you have been an old woman ever since the day that mother died.”

“Perhaps so; but Hal, it could not have been otherwise; it was not that alone, I mean her going from us, that took my youth away; no one except those belonging to me could ever have cared for any one as ugly and repulsive-looking as I am.”

“Magsie!” and Harry looked at the grave face, softened now into excessive tenderness, the scars that had been left by the smallpox hardly discernible; and as he looked he thought that time, which takes from most people’s charms, had certainly added to Margaret’s; and then there came to his mind little events which had happened, chance words, and half sentences which she had sometimes let fall to him, and he knew now what he had never known before, that his sister’s whole life had been embittered by the thought that she was repulsive to all the world.

“Magsie,” he repeated, “my poor Magsie,” and

the young brother spoke compassionately, as though he were speaking to a little child ; "my poor Maggie, it has been all a mistake, no one ever thought of *you*, what you have thought of yourself."

She gazed into his face anxiously, and there was a strange mist before her eyes, and then for the first time in all those fourteen years Margaret spoke of herself, of her trials and difficulties, of the constant struggle to do what was right, of the miserable failure that had seemed the result of it all.

"Only *seemed*, Maggie. I was reading in some book the other day, I forget where it was, that the success of what we have deemed failures on earth, will be one of the sweet surprises of eternity."

She listened to him eagerly ; it was so pleasant to hear him speak like this, and oh, the intense relief of having spoken out at last.

"Harry," she said, "there is one thing I must say to you ; it will make you understand better where my mistake has been,—I could never put *myself* on one side ; I did try to think of others, of father and you, and the girls and Katie—all whom GOD has put in my way—and yet the old miserable, mistrustful feeling was always there, making me hard, and suspicious, and unsympathizing. I think I have learned my lesson, Hal dear, but it has been at a terrible cost."

"Margaret, things may be better than we think, the discipline may be good for Blanche."

She went to her room strangely comforted, and when she knelt and said her prayers before the

little wooden cross, which had been her mother's present on the last birthday that she was with her child, she asked from the depths of a humble, penitent, contrite heart, that the false pride, (for she saw now that it was pride,) that had hindered her for so long, might be taken away, and that in its place might come a childlike trust, a more chastened, resigned spirit.

Early in the morning she was in the Cathedral she loved so well, asking for renewed strength and courage ; and afterwards she stood in her father's study, and told him all that she had told Harry the night before.

He was very merciful in his judgment of them all, speaking tenderly, as her mother would have done, to *her* ; thanking her for all her care of him and of his "little ones," scarcely dwelling upon the hardness which she confessed had been her stumbling-block, and yet very gentle when he talked of Blanche and Amy.

" My child," he said, " perhaps I have not been watchful enough over all of you, I have been too abstracted, too absorbed in my books, and in my work ; we have all had a lesson, Magsie ; God grant that it may not have been given us in vain. As regards Blanche, I must be guided by what young Heathcote says ; I don't like him much, I never did, and what I have heard of him lately has not been much to his credit ; but I can decide nothing hastily, I must make inquiries, and if there is really nothing wrong, nothing but youthful folly, why

then if Blanche really cares about him, I can say nothing ; the longer I live, Margaret, my darling, the more I feel that none of us can determine the affairs of others. We all think we can ; we spend our lives in contriving and plotting, and preventing or forwarding events according to our own judgment, or our own self-will, and we forget that there is One Who rules all things, and to Him we must leave the issue of everything. Do not misunderstand me, Margaret ; of course we must not allow or countenance what is wrong, but we must not allow our opinions, or prejudices, or antipathies to come in the way of our duty to others."

"Father dear, I think I have done this always, all through my life."

"My child, it is the fault of most strong natures, —a fault that often needs a desperate cure ; and do you know how God deals with such cases, Margaret ? He lets us make some great mistake, and then we turn from our own blind ways, from our own self-chosen paths, to worship and adore His Own sweet Will, concerning ourselves and others."



CHAPTER VIII.

“I HONOUR HER FOR DOING IT.”

“Sweetheart, I love you so well that your good name is mine.”

TENNYSON.

BEFORE the week was over, two engagements were announced in Northminster, that of Vernon Heathcote and Blanche Melville, and of Ralph Norton—the dashing young cornet of Dragoons—and Leila Howard.

Vernon had told his tale to the Dean, honestly enough now; and Blanche had had her say, and announced her intention of never marrying any one else; to do her justice, she was heartily ashamed of her conduct, and her father looked upon this as a very hopeful symptom, and he told the young people in his kind, gentle way, that if two years hence they were in the same mind, he would not refuse his consent to their marriage. He had made inquiries respecting young Heathcote's character, and although the answers had not been wholly satisfactory, there was nothing which the Dean could really take hold of, as an excuse for turning him off,

—all he could find out were one or two boyish escapades, and a few extravagances, which Vernon declared upon his honour should be the last, in which he would indulge.

There was no brightness about the young couple, they were quiet and matter-of-fact enough now that the thing was acknowledged ; it seemed as though the wrong doing of all those months had cast a gloom upon the present, and marred the fair promise of the future.

Vernon went back to London, and Blanche became very grave and quiet, and sometimes was irritable and gloomy.

Margaret was very pitiful to her in those days ; not openly so, for pity would not have been acceptable to the girl's proud nature, but she tried to spare her unnecessary worry, and often took Amy out with her, and left Blanche to herself ; for somehow poor little Amy's connivance at the secret engagement, had made her sister very bitter against her now.

Margaret often wondered how it would all end ; but the trouble that had come, partly she knew through her own fault, was already doing its work ; she let things take their course now, only asking God to do with those she loved as He in His Infinite Wisdom saw fit.

Harry had gone away the day after the ball, and was not likely to return for two or three weeks ; and Margaret had only seen Katie once, and then they had exchanged congratulations.

Leila was in a state of excessive happiness ; Ralph Norton, a great, good-natured fellow with very few ideas in his head, and not a vestige of poetry in his whole composition, was invested with every attribute of a hero of romance ; and Charlie remarked that "Leila's great goose was a very enormous swan indeed." Whereupon, Katie rebuked him, and told him that she was ashamed of him ; "Mr. Norton was very nice indeed, and quite clever enough."

One thing was quite certain, he was desperately fond of Leila, and there was a fund of shrewd common sense at the bottom of the somewhat awkward stupid manner, from which Ursula predicted great things for her indolent romantic sister.

"Of course he is rich," Katie had said, when Leila first told her the news and gave her a list of Ralph's perfections ; for it was a well-known fact that Leila had frequently announced that she would never marry a man who could not afford to keep a carriage and a retinue of servants.

"No, that's just what he is not," answered the girl, looking, it must be confessed, rather crest-fallen, "he will be some day when his great-uncle dies, but he says he's very strong, and he hopes he may live a great many years ; in the mean time, we must go to India, and do the best we can."

"To India ! oh, Leila, how very far away."

"Yes, but there's no help for it ; Ralph says we must do it ; we could not afford to live at home, and he has written to his father, and he thinks it

is the best thing we can do. I don't like leaving you all, dear Katie, but I have never been of much use at home, and you will be here to take care of father and Ursula."

Poor Katie ! what was it that sent such a pang to her heart, that made her feel so horribly selfish as Leila spoke.

"You will be here to take care of father and Ursula," the words kept ringing through her ears, with a kind of mocking sound.

Yes, this must be her lot ; for her there could be none other ; she reproached herself that she could ever have dreamed of anything else, that since that night when Harry had spoken those words, and looked as he *had* looked, she had allowed herself to think that happiness, greater than any she had ever known, was in store for her. Truthfully and honestly she had asked herself the question, "Do I love him ?" She knew that she should have to answer it as soon as he returned from London, and so she had answered it to herself : "I begin to think I have loved him all my life ; I don't remember the time when I did not care for him ; I think it dates back from the day I fell down and hurt my foot in the shrubbery, and he carried me home although he was not much taller than I was, and was so gentle and so kind."

And now Leila's words had awakened her from that short bright dream of happiness ; and she went back to her daily life, to her care of her father and

Ursula, to her thought for them all, and only hoped that it would not be as hard for Harry as it was for her.

She dreaded to hear that he was coming home, and when a short loving note from Margaret told her that he was expected on the very evening of the day she was writing, she felt her courage fail her, and wondered how she could avoid meeting him.

Poor child, it was a terrible struggle, but she had always sought for strength, in her own simple, childlike trusting way, and she sought it now, and found it.

The very next morning there came a letter to Ursula from "the big boys" in Australia. They were generally very cheery epistles that the pair sent home, full of anecdotes and descriptions of their wild bush life; and they were usually read aloud in the Refuge, in presence of the whole family.

It fell to Leila's lot that day to be the reader. As she was waiting for them all to settle themselves, and for her father to come in, she glanced down the first page, and she managed to fathom its contents; she turned quickly to Eva and said, "Run away, darling, and tell father we will come to him in the dining-room," and then she went up to Ursula and showed her the words which had caught her eye.

"About Duncan, they have heard of him at last; oh, Ursula, will you tell us what it is?"

"Duncan has been getting into trouble out here, forging his name to a bill ; he has managed to escape, and the fellow who told us the story thinks he has gone back to England, anyhow to Europe, —the details appeared in one of the Australian papers ; and may be copied into the English ones ; this is why we have written to you about it ; keep everything you can out of father's way."

Poor Ursula ! she could hardly get to the end of the pithy sentences, and when she left off reading, they were all very silent for a few minutes, sitting staring at each other in blank amazement, and at last the elder sister said,

"It is very terrible, we have had sorrows and troubles, but no disgrace has ever yet fallen upon our name ; we must hide it from father if we can, I think it would kill him."

"Yes," and Katie took the letter out of Ursula's hand, "I had better go to him at once, I will tell him that the first part is on business, and I will read him all the rest."

"Oh, Duncan, Duncan," she cried, as she hurried to the dining-room, "mother told me to be kind to you, and I will, indeed I will if I have the chance, whatever you may have done."

The Squire was quite satisfied with her explanation, and listened eagerly to his boys' news ; but Katie could not help thinking how sorely he had changed during the last few months, how all life and strength and energy seemed to have gone from him.

"I want you to go into Northminster for me this morning, my dear," he said.

"This morning, father? I have a great many things to do at home; may Charlie go instead?"

She generally obeyed his every wish, and perhaps for this reason it was, that he would not be put off now.

"No," he answered fractiously, "Charlie cannot do what I want; this letter must be given into Mr. Heathcote's own hands, and you must bring me back an answer."

"Could not Charlie do that, father?"

Mr. Howard stamped his foot impatiently.

"If it is too much trouble for you," he said, "I will go in myself; I should have done so if I had felt well enough."

"Dear father, I will go, what I have to do at home can wait."

"That's my own good child, I never knew my little Katie say nay to me before."

And Katie smiled a weary smile, and went away to ask Charlie to be her companion into Northminster. "I cannot go alone," she said to herself, "I could not risk meeting him to-day; I am not strong enough to answer if he speaks to me."

It was a quiet walk into the city; even Charlie was subdued by the sad news that had come in the "big boys'" letter.

"Shall you call at the Deanery, Katie?" he said.

"No, not to-day, I want to get back as fast as I can."

Mr. Heathcote was not at home, and his wife ushered the brother and sister into the drawing-room, and insisted upon their waiting there until his return.

"He cannot be long," she said, "he has gone over to Ellesmere" (a town some seven or eight miles distant) "to see about this unfortunate affair."

"What affair?"

"Have you not heard about it? The Bank stopped payment yesterday, and Mr. Churchill has been taken up on suspicion of embezzlement."

At this moment Mr. and Miss Melville were announced; the Heathcote girls came in with them, and the conversation became general, but the one topic of course was this terrible disgrace that had fallen upon the manager of the Ellesmere Bank.

"And do you know," said Dora Heathcote, "that Mary has broken off her engagement; poor Tom Raymond went back to his ship this morning, and he told his cousin Minnie, who told me, that he went over there last night, and that she would not have a word to say to him, and she returned him all his letters and presents. The poor fellow was nearly heart-broken, Minnie said," and Dora looked straight at Margaret, evidently expecting her to comment upon her news.

The chattering and gossip that went on at the Heathcotes' was one of Margaret's greatest trials, when for any reason she was obliged to call there.

“Indeed,” she answered very stiffly, “yes, it is all very sad.”

“I don’t think he ought to have allowed her to do it,” put in Evelyn, one of the younger girls, “I shouldn’t have taken the letters and the presents if I had been Tom, should you, Mr. Melville?”

“I don’t know,” answered Harry, “but this I do think, that the girl behaved nobly; of course she could not hold him to his engagement if this should prove to be true.”

“You think then that he was right to leave her when she is in such trouble?”

“I do not say that; I should have scorned him if *he* had broken it off, but I honour *her* for doing it more than I can say.”

“Oh, Mr. Melville;” “Oh, Harry, why?” Even Margaret joined in the question.

“Because it is not fair to mix up a man’s name with anything of dishonour; never mind how poor or how humble a woman is, a fellow can raise her up if he likes, but he can’t take the stain off her father’s character, or off the character of any of her belongings who may have committed some deed of shame. Mind you, I am not judging Tom Raymond, I am only admiring her.”

They went on talking and arguing for a long time, until Mr. Heathcote came in, and then they turned to him and asked him what the last report was.

“Things look black enough,” he answered shortly, and then he turned to Katie and asked

her business with him. She gave him her father's letter, and he went away, and soon returned with the answer, and all this time the girl sat quite still and silent, hearing the hum of voices around her, but not heeding what they were all saying ; only the echo of Harry's words was in her ears, "Because it is not fair to mix up a man's name with anything of dishonour."

And dishonour had fallen upon them ; Duncan the eldest brother had been branded as a forger ; Ursula herself had said that disgrace was attached to their name. Sometimes during those last days she had thought that when she told him why she could not leave her home he would have said that he could wait, and perhaps in after years he might come home, and they could all live together at the Grange ; and now even that vague far-away hope was taken from her, and she felt that all that she had meant to tell him must never escape her lips ; she must not let him know that she cared for him, for she could never tell him of Duncan's disgrace, never let him know that his own words had placed an impassable barrier between them.

"Katie," he said, crossing the room, and standing before her, "may I come to the Grange this evening, and may I speak to you alone ?"

She knew it must come, the sooner perhaps the better, and yet she shrank from it, poor child, as she had never shrunk from anything in all her life before, and she sought in her agony for a few hours' reprieve.

"Not this evening, please, we have our Australian letters to write, and Frank and Harold grumble so dreadfully if we do not send them volumes."

"Then to-morrow; please let it be to-morrow, I cannot wait any longer, Katie."

"Yes, to-morrow will do very well; we shall dine early, Leila and Charlie and Mr. Norton are going over to Uplands to a mixed party, and I shall be at home with father and Ursula."

"At what time shall I come?"

"Between six and seven."

He looked as though he would have said more, but she jumped up hurriedly and remarked that they must hurry home, they had already far exceeded their time, and she held out her hand and wished him good-bye, and he whispered, "To-morrow evening as the clock strikes six, Katie."

"Leila," said Katie the next morning, "have you told Ralph about that letter?"

"About Duncan, do you mean?—yes."

"What did he say?"

"He was very sorry; he felt for us very much; he says his own eldest brother once got into a terrible scrape, (he is dead now, poor fellow,) and that there is a black sheep in every family."



CHAPTER IX.

“LET US BE FRIENDS STILL.”

“To weep is to make less the depth of grief.”

King Henry VI.

SIX o'clock. Leila and Charlie, and Ralph Norton, had gone to the party; the Squire was asleep in the library; it was Ursula's quiet hour in her own room, and Katie, pale and trembling, sat alone in the great desolate drawing-room —there came a ring at the hall door, and the next minute Maria announced “Mr. Melville.”

“Katie,” he said, in his bright cheery way, “I have come to-night to tell you that I am not going to India after all; I got a letter this morning from Lord Wentmore, offering me promotion with him in Florence.”

“Yes,” answered poor Kate; “I am glad: Margaret would not have liked you to go so far away.”

“No, she would not; but still if it had been right I must have gone, that is to say, if—if you would not have minded the distance.” She did not look

astonished or awkward, and he went on in a nervous hurried fashion. "I am beginning at the wrong end, Katie; I had better tell you at once that I have loved you all my life, and I want to know if you will be my wife?"

No answer; only a fixed earnest look upon the sweet young face.

"Katie, I have thought of your possible objections, especially since Leila's engagement; if I had gone to India I could not have left you behind, it would have been for such long years; but now, if you will only give me a hope before I go back, I can return any day, and we can write to each other very often."

"Harry, we have been friends always, let us be friends still; but indeed, indeed, I can never be anything else to you."

"Because of your father and of Ursula? Margaret half prepared me for this, but, Katie dearest, all I ask is for hope in the future."

"Harry, there is none."

"Do you mean that I have been deceived? do you mean that you have never loved me?"

Oh how she prayed then for strength to do what she felt she must do; she saw in that moment that if she could have told him how she really cared for him—how she had cared for him always, he would have gone back to Florence perfectly happy, trusting in the future; but now that must not be, for there was that terrible stain of dishonour on her name: she could not act, so that in the future he

would have cause to think less well of her than he did of Mary Churchill, the banker's daughter—if she could but have told him the truth: but that was impossible. Duncan's sin must be kept secret at any cost, at least she must not be the one to publish it even to Harry.

She did not answer him for a minute; and then she repeated her former words: "Harry, we have been friends always, let us be friends still."

"That is all you can say?"

"Yes, all."

Her unnaturally calm manner deceived him; he looked up angrily for a moment, and said, "Why did you trifle with me as you did?" then he felt the injustice of the speech, and he went up to her and laid his hand upon hers, and said very quietly, but in a strange, hollow, unnatural voice, "forgive me, Katie, I was wrong to say that; I mistook the friendship on your part, for—for what I wanted it to be; and now, good-bye, I must leave Northminster to-morrow; will you not wish me God speed, Katie?"

"God bless and keep you, Harry, always," she said, and he bent over her and kissed her hand in the chivalrous manner that sat so well upon his youth, and then he turned towards the door to go away.

She spoke only one word more: "Margaret."

He understood what she meant, and answered: "She did not know that I was coming here this evening, she has never heard what it was that I was

coming to say ; she may have her suspicions, but she shall never hear from me what has passed between us now."

"Thanks ; you are very good."

She could not bear that Margaret should think badly of her ; she could ill afford, poor child, to lose her friendship, and she felt that if she once knew that Harry had proposed, and that she had refused him, there must be a change in the intercourse which was one of the few joys left to her.

"Good to keep to myself what I could not bear any one to know ? I only wish, Katie, you would give me something hard to do for your sake," and he closed the door gently and went away, out into the cold January night, with a great chill at his heart.

When he reached the Deanery he told his father he thought he had better go up to town at once, he might be of some use to Lord Wentmore ; and the Dean, who never found fault with any one for wanting to be at work, said he thought it might be advisable ; whilst Margaret inwardly chafing at being deprived of the next two or three days of her brother's society, which she had so counted upon, and wondering at his unaccountable behaviour after what she had seen at the ball, and in the Heathcotes' drawing-room the day before, packed up his portmanteau and tried to be cheerful.

"Magsie, you'll let me know about the Grange people when you write," were his last words, spoken in a would-be indifferent tone, as he jumped into

the cab, which was waiting early the next morning to take him to the station.

"Yes, I'll write anything I know; but I see them so seldom now, poor Katie's life is so full of care."

He saw that she was vexed with him, that she did not think he had acted honourably in thus going away from Katie. "Better so," he said, bitterly, "better she should blame me than have any feeling against her."

And Katie sat on in the dreary drawing-room—after he had left her, and it seemed as though a part of her life had gone from her. She had no power of thought; she could neither reason nor argue, all she could do was to repeat over and over again those favourite lines of hers from the *Christian Year*.

"No—rather steel thy melting heart,
To act the martyr's sternest part,
To watch with firm unshrinking eye,
Thy darling visions as they die,
Till all bright hopes and hues of day
Have faded into twilight grey."

She heard a footstep approaching, and she jumped up and stood before the fire.

"I think it is grey twilight for me now," she mused; and then she threw back her head in a manner peculiar to herself, and which Charlie always laughed at, and told her it was like a charger getting ready for battle; and the expression of agony that had been on her face went from it as she said

to herself, "After the grey twilight, although it may last a long long time, the bright dawn must come."

There was a knock at the door, and Maria, an old privileged servant, entered the room. "I beg your pardon, Miss Katie, I thought Mr. Melville was here; I wanted to tell you that tea is ready, and master is awake and asking for you."

"Thanks, I am coming; no, Mr. Melville has been gone some time; Maria, please not to let Miss Howard know that he has been here."

"No, miss," answered Maria, startled at the unusual request, for concealment of any kind was utterly foreign to Katie's nature.

"He came on business," continued the girl, evidently thinking some explanation necessary, "and it would only worry Miss Howard to hear about it."

Maria looked into the sweet young face, which she loved better than any other, save Eva's, in all the house, and then she wiped her eyes with her white apron and said, "I'll do your bidding, Miss Katie, dear; but please don't lay more burdens upon yourself than you are able to bear."

"You may be quite sure I will not do that, you good old Maria; now I must run to father, he will be impatient for his tea."

"Always thinking of others, never of herself," muttered Maria; "it's a good thing that she's not the one as is going away, or I don't know what would become of us all. I have thought sometimes that Mr. Harry, from the Deanery, would rob

us of her some day ; and I thought that that's what he might have come about to-night, but she don't look happy enough to have said yes, nor miserable enough to have said no ; why, my niece, Jane, when she wouldn't have young Brown, the carpenter, for some foolish reason or other, cried for three days and nights, until some one told him about it, and he came back."

The next morning brought Ralph Norton to the Grange before luncheon ; the regiment had received orders to hold itself in readiness for embarkation, some day during the spring ; six months at least before the time originally fixed upon—and of course he must take Leila with him, he could not leave her behind, so the wedding must be very soon, some time in March.

"Before March," said Ursula and Katie ; "for of course it cannot be in Lent—in fact, it ought to be before Septuagesima, but that would be impossible."

"Not at all," answered Ralph ; "there is no reason whatever, that I can see, why it should not be to-morrow, and then we could go and stay with the old people for a month, and come back here to see you all before we sail."

"But, Ralph, you forget ; there is the trousseau to be thought about."

"Bother the trousseau ! why, she has quite clothes enough ; that's a sweet dress that she wears every day ; and what could be better than the blue silk she appeared in at the ball ? the fact is," and

the great honest fellow blushed like a girl, "the fact is, Leila looks well in anything."

So after a grand consultation, it was decided that the wedding was to be in three weeks, the Thursday before Septuagesima Sunday, and the young couple were to go and visit Ralph's people, and spend the last few days in England, at the Grange.

The Indian outfit could be seen about by the sisters after the marriage ; and in the meantime they must do their best for their bride.

"We must not send her amongst her new relations without proper clothes," said Ursula, "and so, Katie, you must take these trinkets of mine into Northminster to-day, and see what you can get for them."

"Ursula, dearest, you cannot part with those."

"Yes, darling, I can and will ; my treasure is laid up for me elsewhere, Katie ; *his* gifts were very precious in the first days of my sorrow, but now that I am fourteen years nearer to him than I was then, I can bear to let them go to make others happy,—they are all there but this," and she pointed to the diamond hoop upon the third finger of her left hand ; "and *this* is going to the Dean, for the new chalice he is getting made for the Cathedral."

Katie walked into Northminster that afternoon, and when she brought back the crisp bank-notes that were to buy Leila's finery, Ursula laughed merrily, and wondered where their father would think the money came from.

"He will not trouble himself to inquire," an-

swered Katie, with a sigh ; " he has a way of thinking bank-notes drop from the clouds."

" Poor father," and Ursula smiled sadly, " he is so pleased about this wedding, quite eager and excited ; I remember how anxious he was to hurry matters on, fourteen years ago."

" It must be a very quiet affair," said Katie, " he is anxious to ask half the county, but of course that must not be."

" No, he has been in here talking about it this afternoon, and I have made him see that it would not do, I put it upon the plea that you and Charlie would be unequal to entertaining so many guests, and that he would be tired ; so it is settled that the Dean is to marry them, and Blanche and Amy are to be the other bridesmaids, and Mr. Heathcote is to be the only guest at the breakfast besides one of Ralph's brother officers ; fortunately there are no brothers or sisters on the Norton side to be invited,—fancy what the task would have been of having to entertain them."

Leila was very bright and sweet during those last three weeks of her old home life ; clinging to her sisters with touching affection, and being more to her father than she had ever been before,—that hero of hers with his honest straightforward way of looking at things, was already exercising a very salutary influence upon the dreamy nature. " After all, I believe our beauty will turn into a good poor man's wife," said Ursula, the evening before the wedding.

"I hope I may be a better wife than I have been a daughter or sister," answered poor Leila, smiling through her tears.

"My dear child, put such thoughts out of that foolish little head of yours, you have been very good, and we shall miss you terribly."

With this assurance Leila seemed content, and began talking of Ralph and Ralph's perfections, until Charlie came in and laughed at her, and then she went off and played her last game of cribbage with her father, at least for some weeks to come.

The morning rose bright, clear, and frosty, and the wedding, quiet though it was to have been, attracted a crowd of people into the grand old Cathedral.

It was a pretty sight,—the young bride and bridegroom, he so tall and stalwart looking, she pale and stately, but with a soft, subdued look upon her face; then there were the four bridesmaids, Katie and sweet little Eva, and Blanche and Amy Melville, all of them very fair to look upon, in their white dresses and crimson ribbons.

Margaret too was there in pale grey silk, and Katie felt she could bear it all better after she had heard the grave tones of her friend's voice in the earnest "God bless you, my little Katie."

One of the Minor Canons, a friend of Ralph's, had gone out to the Grange in the morning, and there had been an early celebration of the Holy Communion in the little Oratory.

"I am afraid I have not thought of those kind of things much," Ralph had said to Leila, when the subject was first mooted, "but I know it's right, and I went to-day and spoke to the Dean, and, darling, I'll come in the morning of our wedding day, because I feel that it will bring a blessing with it; the Dean said,"—and Ralph's voice sank into a low reverent whisper,—“that it was coming nearer to God than we could ever come at any other time.”

The breakfast was like all other breakfasts—every one feeling sorrowful except the principal people concerned, and every one trying to be merry,—Ralph breaking down in praising up his wife, and Charlie returning thanks for the bridesmaids in a very humorous speech. And then came the parting—the worst part of it in Ursula's room, where she lay in a dove-coloured dress, and a little cap with pink ribbons, waiting to receive them.

“Ursie, oh, Ursie, I cannot bear to leave you.”

“My darling, I feel quite happy in trusting you to Ralph.”

“I will do my best, Ursula,” and for the first time Ralph stooped down and kissed his new sister's brow.

“Thank you for giving her to me,” he said, and then he put his arm round his young wife's waist, and drew her away.

“We will be back in three weeks, father,” said the bride, trying to be cheerful.

“Yes, my child, we shall be glad to see you

and your husband,—a finer young fellow I never saw."

"Katie, dear Katie, it seems so selfish to leave you to bear all the home burdens."

"They are not burdens, dearest Leila, it is a pleasure to be of use to somebody."

"Yes, but you have more than your share."

"No, that cannot be, for I have not one more than God sends me; if there are any extra ones, they are of my own making; but you must not stay talking any longer, Ralph is getting impatient," and followed by a shower of old shoes and rice, and by a loud ringing shout from old Thomas' stentorian voice, Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Norton left the Grange.

"Katie," said Margaret, "you are tired out, is there anything in which I can help you?"

"No, thanks, there is nothing."

"I am going to take the girls away, and we have offered Mr. Heathcote a seat in the carriage; you will be glad to get rid of us, darling."

"Not of *you*; but I own I am just a little weary; and father and Ursula have to be looked after, and Captain Willman has taken Charlie off to the barracks; there is no one at home but me now."

They were standing in the porch, and old Thomas proud and exulting, went up to them and took off his hat respectfully.

"It will be your turn next, Miss Katie, I'm thinking," he said, "and if it ain't making too bold to say such a thing, he'll be a happy man as wins

you, only I hopes the new gardener will have come before that, so as to get the place in order a bit."

Margaret looked at Katie, and wondered why it was that she turned so deadly pale as she answered,

"Thanks, Thomas, but I am going to be the old maid of the family; the next wedding must be Master Charlie's or little Miss Eva's."

The Deanery carriage drove up at this minute, and Margaret went into the house to summon her sisters, who had gone to Ursula's room.

"Take care of Katie, Ursula," she said, "you two must look after each other now."

"Yes, Katie needs looking after, I fear; we have let her do too much, and yet it was hardly to be prevented, the necessarily hurried wedding has left so much upon her hands."

"I'll take care of them," put in little Eva, "I'll be Ursula's nurse, and Katie's nurse, and make them both quite quite well."

"I think she is our best nurse really," said Ursula, "anyhow she is our sunbeam and our brightness, are you not, my pet?"

"I'm going to be married soon, Ursie," continued the child, "Captain Willman asked me at breakfast, and he said we should have such a beauty cake, much beautier than Leila's and Ralph's; only I shall not go away from you as she has done, I told him I could not, and he said, 'all right.'"

There was a general laugh at poor Eva's expense, which did every one good, and then Mar-

garet and her sisters took a hurried leave of their friends, and Ursula and Katie sat and talked far on into the gloaming, and Mr. Howard walked about restlessly from room to room, talking to every one he could find about the events of the day.

It was late when Katie went up stairs to take off her thin dress, and to be alone for a little time with her own thoughts.

They were no longer sad ones ; she could rejoice now in Leila's happiness, and be thankful for the love that was left to herself, and she could pray for Duncan, her wandering erring brother, and ask that it yet might be granted her to fulfil her mother's wish ; and she could think calmly now of Harry, and hope that in the days to come he might be happy as she felt he deserved to be.

It was a strange new life that began for her the next day. Leila gone from her childhood's home for ever ; Charlie returned to school ; she, left to care for the others, and to spend much of her time alone ;—and how long would this go on ? would there be ever any break in the dull routine of her daily life in the old Grange ?



CHAPTER X.

“IT CAN NEVER, NEVER BE.”

“There’s nae luck about the house,
There’s nae luck at all.”

Scotch Ballad.

THE first break came, in the return of the bride and bridegroom, radiant with happiness.

“The dear old governor and my mother say they never saw any one so lovely,” Ralph announced triumphantly, “she has quite won their hearts.”

The sisters smiled at his enthusiasm, but they liked him all the better for it, and when at the end of a fortnight Ralph and his wife started for Portsmouth, they could not but feel amid all their sorrow at parting, that Leila’s chances of happiness seemed very secure.

And the next break, what was it? a sad one indeed; a heavy, crushing blow, coming upon them all with stunning, bewildering force. Mr. Howard was a shareholder in the Ellesmere Bank, and before the bright summer days set in the

girls knew that they were ruined, that the little money that had been left of late years out of the Squire's fortune, must go in common honour to pay the poor things who had lost their all, through the mistakes that had been made by those whose business it was to look into things.

He had had a second slight stroke of paralysis in the spring, from which he had not recovered ; his mind was considerably affected by it, he took no interest in business matters. Mr. Heathcote tried in vain to rouse him to talk over things, and then went to Ursula and Katie in despair, not knowing how to act.

“I suppose we must manage for ourselves,” said Ursula, “will you tell us what we ought to do, Mr. Heathcote?”

The lawyer was a kind-hearted man, and he looked compassionately at the pale worn face and at the fragile form, and he told his wife afterwards, that he felt as though he would rather have been shot than say what he felt he ought to say.

But Ursula came to his relief as he sat hesitating and shuffling his feet about, and looking very red and uncomfortable.

“Of course one thing is quite clear, the Grange must be sold or let ; we cannot afford to stay on here.”

It was easier for him to speak then, and he gave the best advice he could, and then he said, “Where shall you go in the event of your getting rid of the place ?”

"Away, as far away as we can get," said Katie impetuously.

"Hush, darling, I don't think we ought to say that; father will never be happy out of reach of Northminster, he likes to see his old friends and frequent his old haunts; and after all we shall have paid every one to the uttermost farthing, and there will be no disgrace upon our name;" and then the hot blood mounted to her face, for she remembered the big boys' letter and the story of Duncan's dishonour. She recovered herself however in a moment, and continued, "My mother's little fortune of two hundred a year is all that we ought to keep, to live upon; Mr. Heathcote, do you know any house in the city that will suit us?"

"There is not one to let in the whole place."

"Not one, are you quite sure?"

"Well, there is that little cottage of Gibbs', in the High Street, a dark, low dwelling, just opposite a dead wall."

"You mean where Parnell the dentist used to live."

"Yes, that would hardly do for you."

"I think it will; we must make it as bright as we can inside; will you inquire about it for us? and Katie shall go and look at it to-morrow."

Katie shuddered, she remembered how years before, when she was a little child, she and Leila had gone with their mother to Mr. Parnell's, and how they had hated the dull, dark room, and had

said to each other that they could not live in such a nasty house.

She remembered too the gentle rebuke that had fallen from their mother's lips.

"My darlings, we must all live, and try to do our duty, where GOD has placed us ; it is not His Will that you should call such a house as this your home, if it were I dare say you would love it quite as well as you do the dear old Grange."

It seemed as though she still heard the echo of that sweet voice, when she stood with Eva the next day in the low dark room of the little cottage in the High Street.

GOD had willed now that this should be her home, and she knew He would help her to do her duty there.

"Katie," said Eva, "where is the garden ? show me the garden."

"My darling, there is none."

"No trees, no flowers ? oh Katie, I cannot live without some flowers ; where shall we get them to take to mother's grave ?"

"I dare say Miss Melville will give us some, dear, when we want them."

"But they will not be the same as our own, Katie," continued the child persistently ; "there will be no water-lilies there as there are in the pond at the Grange, and oh, it is so dark, so very dark and dreary."

"Eva, dear, it is a cloudy day ; when the sun is out, it will be nice and light."

"I wish it would be sunshine always, I should like to live for ever where the sun is always shining, and where the flowers always bloom."

"My child, that can never be on earth."

"No, I know that, but Ursula told me that it is light always where Jesus is."

Katie turned away; often and often in after days she thought of the child's words, and of the strange presentiment of sorrow that had come to her for an instant, as her little sister spoke, but which was speedily dispelled by the sound of the child's voice crying,

"Katie, Katie, I have found the dearest little room at the top of the house, with a little window in it looking on to the Cathedral Yard; I want to have it for my very own bedroom, and I shall hear the music in the early morning when it is too wet for me to go to Matins."

The report that Katie took home, of the house, decided Ursula upon taking it, and now there was nothing to do but to begin to think of moving, for Mr. Heathcote had found a purchaser for the Grange, who wanted to take possession at Michaelmas, and of course there was a great deal needed in the way of repairs before it would be fit for any new tenants to inhabit.

So the girls settled to leave early in August, for Charlie would be at home then to help them in the move.

All too quickly the time came, dreaded by all, longed for only by the poor Squire, who had found

out that the place did not agree with him, never had done so, it was so miserably damp ; the clear dry air of Northminster would make him quite strong again.

Maria only was to go with them to their new home. Thomas had announced his intention of retiring from work, and taking a room next door to his old master.

“ I’ve got a bit of money, Miss Katie,” said the faithful old man, “ and I’ve nobody but myself to think of, and so if I likes to be handy to you, and keep you from being murdered in your beds at night, why that’s no business of anybody’s as I can see.”

Katie understood his motives, and turned from him to hide the tears which she could not restrain. There was much kindness shown to them on all sides, such offers of help from neighbours rich and poor, such tender thought for Ursula from the dear old Dean and Dr. Browne. It was a perpetual anxiety to Katie how the move could best be managed for her, for she had never been carried further than the Oratory all through those long years. They told her they would contrive it for her, and so she left it all to them, and busied herself in making the house in High Street as comfortable as possible for her reception.

She saw a great deal of Margaret at that time. The Dean’s daughter used to go in and help her with her work, and Katie could not help thinking how much less cold and unbending

she was to her sisters than she had been in the old days.

Once she said something of the kind to her, and Margaret answered,

"It was Harry who first made me see my mistake. I am happier now than I have ever been, and it is to him I owe it all."

It was the first time for months that she had voluntarily named her brother, and Katie felt that she was expected to say something, and thought she could not do better than acquiesce in the praise bestowed upon him.

"Yes," she said, "Harry had a knack of setting everything right, when we were all children together, and sometimes used to have a desperate quarrel."

"There is only one point upon which I feel inclined to be angry with him now," and Margaret looked into the girl's face as though she would read her very soul.

The honest, truthful nature could not brook that he should be hardly judged ; he who had been so noble and so blameless through it all.

"Margaret," she began, and then she stopped, whilst cheek, and neck, and brow were crimson.

"Well, Katie, what is it?"

The tone was not encouraging. There was just a little of the old hard manner to be detected in it ; but at that moment it helped Katie and braced her up to the effort she had determined to make more than any words of sympathy would have

done. There was just a moment's silence, and then quite quietly and without a shadow of variation in her voice, she said,

“ Margaret, it would be foolish and wrong to pretend that I did not understand what you meant when you spoke to me and looked at me like that just now, and I want to tell you, I have wanted you to know it for a long time, that whatever fault there has been, has been all mine ; he was noble, and good, and true as he has always been.”

“ You mean that you refused him ?”

“ Yes.”

“ Oh, Katie, why could you not love him ?”

“ I refused him, Margaret ; that is enough, even you must not ask more,” and there was a sad, quiet dignity in Katie's manner which went straight to Margaret's heart.

“ My poor child,” she said.

And the long, pent up agony could no longer be restrained, and Katie laid her head on Margaret's shoulder, and sobbed as she had not sobbed since her mother died.

“ My poor child, so you are not quite a heroine after all.”

“ Oh, no, oh, no, far from it. Oh it has been so hard all through these terrible months.”

“ It shall not be hard any longer, my little Katie. I will write to him to-day and tell him to come to me.”

The poor girl jumped up then and stood before her friend ; the tears all gone, nothing but a grave,

sorrowful, determined expression upon the young face.

“ Margaret, dearest, make me a promise.”

“ Not until I know what it is.”

“ I will tell you. You have misunderstood me quite. What I said to—to Harry on that evening he came out to the Grange, I should say now, more than ever now.”

“ Because of your changed fortunes?”

“ No ; as if that would make any difference to him ! I cannot tell you why, Margaret, I can only repeat what I have already said, it can never, never be.”

“ Only one question more. Has it in any way to do with your father and Ursula ?”

“ I might not have been able to leave them. I don’t quite see how I could have done it ; but they were not in my thoughts when I told him that he must not carry away with him one single bit of hope.”

“ And there is none now?”

“ None ; and Margaret, you must give me your promise that you will neither write to him nor tell him how weak I have been to-day. It could do no good, it would only make things worse, harder for him and for me.”

Margaret gave the required promise sorely against her will, but she saw that written on the girl’s face which convinced her that her plan would be useless, that it would only be inflicting fresh pain upon them both.

It was a good thing for Katie that there was a great deal to be done in the little house that afternoon, and soon she was giving directions about the laying down of carpets and the hanging of pictures, and Margaret marvelled as she listened to her, but she knew where her strength came from, and whence the power to endure patiently was sent her.

"You have promised, Margaret," were Katie's last words to her friend. "I must be getting home now to see what Charlie is doing. He ought to have sent the cart off with the things for Ursula's room before this. I cannot think what he is about."

"Yes, dear, you may trust me, now and always."

And so they parted, Margaret to go to the quiet Deanery, Katie to wend her way along the dusty high road to the old Grange, to the peaceful home of her childhood, which in two days more would be her home no longer.

She passed through the overgrown garden, bright with its wild luxuriance of summer flowers, and she contrasted it with the dingy back court of the house in the High Street.

"Poor little Eva," she mused, "our own little sunbeam; she seems fitted to live for ever amongst the flowers. I am very much afraid it will be harder for her than we think. There is a great deal of mother's delicacy of constitution about her, Dr. Browne said, after she had the measles, and sometimes lately I have been afraid that she might pine away and die."



CHAPTER XI.

THE LILY FOR MOTHER'S GRAVE.

“ Thy LORD hath need of these flowrets gay,
The reaper said, and smiled,
Dear tokens of the earth are they,
Where He was once a child.”

LONGFELLOW.

“ **K**ATIE, have you seen any one? have you heard?”

“ Seen? heard? no, what is it?” and Katie leant against the railing for support, for the wild, scared look on Charlie’s face made her feel sure that there was something dreadful to tell.

“ Father! Ursula!” she exclaimed.

“ No, neither of them; but oh, Katie, I must tell it out at once, our darling is missing, and we are afraid she has been drowned,—they are dragging the pond now; I saw you, and came to meet you.”

“ Tell me about it, Charlie; indeed I can bear it.”

“ Every one was in a bustle, you know, and she

went up to father and said, in her own sweet pretty way, ‘Father dear, there’s such a beautiful little lily in the pond, may I pick it, and take it to mother’s grave;’ and he said, ‘Yes.’ You know he never refuses the child anything; he did not think of the danger of her going there alone; she went, and we have never seen her since; but—but—” and Charlie hid his face in his hands, and sobbed, “they found her hat floating on the pond! Thomas saw her last; he says she ran past him singing her favourite hymn, ‘Oh, that I had wings of angels,’ and she looked up at him and smiled, and said, ‘I am going to pick a little lily for mother’s grave, father says I may.’ He did not stop her; he thought she was only going into the garden; no one knows it yet, Katie; I dared not tell Ursula, until all hope was gone.”

“They have found her, Charlie.”

They were in sight of the pond now, and they saw old Thomas carrying something in his arms; and they knew that it was Eva’s white dress that was floating in the summer breeze.

“To the house, Thomas,” cried the brother and sister in the same breath; and then they went up to him, not quickly as they had walked before, but with slow, lingering footsteps, dreading what they should see there.

There was nothing to dread; only a sweet, pale child’s face that might have been the face of an angel clasping in her hands a pure white lily—the “little lily” she had picked “for mother’s grave.”

“ Does she breathe, Thomas ? ”

“ I can’t tell, miss, but there’s Dr. Browne’s carriage, I told Tom when Mr. Charlie sent him to look for you just to call and tell him to drive out—I thought somebody would be sure to want him.”

Large tears were coursing each other down the faithful old man’s rugged cheeks, and Katie saw that all hope had gone out of his heart.

They carried Eva into her own little room, and laid her on her bed : everything was done that could be done, to restore life to the little pale inanimate form, but it was all in vain ; God willed it otherwise, He wanted the angel-child to bloom in the fair garden of His own bright Paradise, to live for ever and for ever, amid the flowers, to bask in the perpetual light of the eternal sunshine.

“ My children, she has gone to happiness,” said the kind old doctor, turning to Katie and Charlie, “ I don’t think, looking at her face, that we would seek to keep her here.”

They knelt for an instant by the side of the little bed ; they stooped and kissed the sweet cold brow, and then Katie spoke the one word, “ Ursula.”

Dr. Browne looked grave.

“ Yes, she must be told of it at once ; the shock will be very great ; it must be carefully done. You need have no anxiety about your father, at least for to-day ; I told him ten minutes ago what I feared, and all he said was, ‘ She is going to her mother, it is better so.’ By-and-by he will realise it all, but not just yet ; his mind is not very clear just now ;

he has been somewhat upset with all the bustle and confusion."

"Will you tell Ursula?"

"Yes, if you wish it; but, Katie, I think it might come best from you."

"Very well, I will do it, if I might be left alone with *her* just for a minute before I go to Ursie's room."

They all went away, and Katie was alone with her dead.

"My own, my darling," she murmured, "I don't think I can bear it; but oh, if you are happy, if you are safe home before any of the storms of life have come to you, surely, surely, I ought to be glad and thankful."

But the gladness and the thankfulness would not come yet, and all poor Katie could do was to say the prayer which seems to be the first that our minds can contain in the first moments of our agony—the prayer which must be the best of all prayers, for it was taught us by the dear LORD Himself: "Thy will be done;" over and over again she repeated the words, and when at last she rose from her knees, and once more kissed the sweet dead face, she was able to say from the depths of her sorrowful heart, "If He wanted you, we must give you up willingly, my sunbeam."

And then she went to Ursula's room; lingering for a minute at the door to pray for courage and strength in the difficult task that was before her.

Ursula was busy, looking over a box of old let-

ters, and she did not raise her head up at the sound of Katie's footstep, but said cheerfully,

"You are late, dear ; I have been alone such an age ; I was getting tired of my own company, even little Eva has not been near me ; I was just going to ring to know what had become of everybody."

"Yes, I know I am late."

The tones of the voice were sad and sorrowful, and Ursula put the box on one side, and said,

"Katie, there is something the matter, tell me what it is."

Katie knelt down, and put her arm round her sister's neck.

"Ursula, dearest, do you remember what I told you the other day about our Eva, and the new house? how she seemed to shrink from going there, away from the sunshine and the flowers?"

"Yes, I remember it, and how we feared that perhaps it might be worse for her than for anybody, because of her delicacy since last winter."

"Ursula, we need have no fears for her now."

There was no mistaking her meaning, and the elder sister looked into her face, and said,

"Do not be afraid of telling me the truth."

"Oh, Ursula, our darling has gone to live in the sunshine, and among the flowers for ever."

"Gone to where *he* and mother are," murmured Ursula, "waiting on the other shore. Katie, do not seek to spare me, I would know all."

And Katie told all; told too how wondrously

beautiful their darling looked in her last calm sleep.

She was not prepared for the effect of her words. Ursula, who for all those long years had lain upon her couch, without power of walking or standing, stood up before her and said, "I must go to her."

"Ursula, you cannot, you must not."

"Yes, I can," and she took two or three paces towards the door, and then fell back fainting into Katie's arms.

Dr. Browne was walking up and down the passage within call ; he heard the cry for help, and in an instant he was in the room.

Katie told him the wonderful news. "She walked," she said, "walked from the couch to the door ; she said she must see her."

"Thank God, my dear, thank God ; such cases are not uncommon ; it needs some shock to restore the powers that have been lost for so long. Miss Katie, does it not seem as though the little Angel had already begun to do her work."

All this time he was taking means to restore Ursula to consciousness. Very soon she opened her eyes, and looked around her wonderingly.

"I must go to Eva," she said, "I can walk now."

"She must have her way," said Dr. Browne aside to Katie, "even if it should be at the risk of another of these fainting fits."

She took an arm of each, and they almost

carried her between them to Eva's room, where Charlie was kneeling watching by his little sister's side.

There she lay with the lily in her crossed hands, and with a smile upon her face, and Katie thought as she looked, that Angels must have brushed past their darling with their soft white wings, and left something of their brightness there.

Ursula did not faint, she was strangely calm in that still, sweet presence.

"You were right, Katie," she said, "there need be no more fears for her, I will come again, perhaps I had better go back now."

They took her back, as they had brought her, and she was very ill and exhausted for the remainder of the evening, demanding all poor Katie's care and attention.

Of course the move was put off for a week. The Dean and Margaret were at the Grange early the next morning, taking all trouble off the girls' hands, and comforting them as only those who have known such sorrow can comfort.

There was the smallest ray of comfort coming to Katie and Charlie in the thought of Ursula's possible recovery; but they could hardly be thankful for it yet, in the midst of the loss that seemed to make itself more felt every minute.

They took their sunbeam into the oratory; and the brightest place in all the dreary, desolate, half-dismantled house was that little room where Eva lay amongst the lights and the flowers, with the

lily in her hand and a crucifix at the foot of the tiny coffin.

Every day Ursula walked there, seeming to gain strength each time ; wondering at herself, thinking how happy her little darling would have been to see her as she was now.

“And she *does* see me, Katie, surely ; I feel that she is near us still, nearer than we can realise.”

It was hard to part with her when the day came when they must lay her in the churchyard beneath the hill side, in the grave beside her mother. It was only then that Mr. Howard broke down, and declared that she should not be taken away,—that she was not dead, only asleep, death was not as beautiful as that.

They pacified him as though he were a wayward child, and he went with them to the Cathedral where the Holy Sacrifice was offered, that unites the living with the dead in closest, holiest bonds, and then they stood at the grave, and Katie laid the little lily on her mother’s coffin, and clear and sweet rose the young voices of the choristers as they sang the hymn that had been little Eva’s last earthly song,—

“ Oh that I had wings of angels,
Here to spread and heavenward fly,
I would seek the gates of Zion
Far beyond the starry sky.”

And then they left her beneath the hill side, but

they knew that only the earthly part was there,— that their darling's pure spirit was in the keeping of Him, Who was once a Little Child on earth.

“Ursula,” said Katie, when she went to her sister's room on her return, “Ursula, we would not have her back again even if we could.”

“My darling, no; we will ask rather that Angels' wings may take us to where she is.”



CHAPTER XII.

THIS WORK-A-DAY WORLD.

“Labour is sweet, for Thou hast toiled,
And care is light, for Thou hast cared.”

THEY began their new life in the little house in High Street without their sunbeam to brighten the dreariness, and at first it seemed as though they could never be happy again, that no gleam of joy could ever come to them now.

It was a relief to all of them when Charlie went back to his crammer's, for the poor fellow could not get over his little sister's death. He used to roam about for hours, no one knew where, but sometimes he was seen walking in the direction of the Church, and carrying in his hand a wreath of water-lilies, which he had taken from the pond at the old Grange to place upon that double grave.

By degrees his letters became brighter and more cheery, and at last, one autumn day, a telegram arrived, “I have come out first; I will be home to-night.”

He had not told them when the examination

was to be, and he had gone back to his tutor's after it was over, to await the result. He could not bear to see them until he knew either the best or the worst. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined how well he would do, and his ugly face was all in a glow when he opened the door of the dark little house and stood amongst them eager and triumphant, but still with a shade of sadness upon his brow, when he thought of the joyous welcome that Eva had always given him.

Ursula stood up to greet him.

"Why Ursie," he said, "this is grand."

"Yes, I can move about the house quite easily now, and on Sunday I went in a chair to the Cathedral. They say I shall never be able to do much more, but I am so thankful for this much, coming as it did, when so much was taken from us."

Then there was his father to come forward with his loud,

"So you've distinguished yourself, eh, Charlie? I always said you would."

"I did my best, sir, and now I can get my commission without purchase, and I dare say, if I exchange into some regiment going on foreign service I shall be able to live on my pay."

"Eh, there is no need for that surely, is there, Katie, now that we have reduced our expenditure? He can have his allowance, can't he? What his schooling cost anyhow."

"No, dear, I am afraid he can't. We have been

encroaching upon our principal to do that much, but we will try what can be managed," and the poor old Squire turned to his son, and said cheerfully, "She'll manage it for you; our little Katie always manages everything."

"Katie, indeed it must not be thought of; I shall get on very well, it will only require a little care at first."

But Katie remembered that she had once heard Ralph say that any one who sent a youth into the army with nothing but his pay, was doing him a grievous wrong, sending him into almost unavoidable temptation. There was the warning too of Duncan, who had entered the service just when his father's money troubles were beginning, and who had been to a certain extent thrown upon his own resources.

"It must not be again," she mused, "the risk must not be run. I dare say fifty pounds a year will be as much as he will want, and I think I see my way to getting that."

The next day she was at the Deanery, sitting in the library with Margaret, and to her she propounded her scheme.

"The Danvers want a governess."

"Yes, I know they do."

"English, music, and a little French; three hours in the morning and two in the afternoon, and the remuneration fifty pounds a year."

"My dear Katie, you have learned the advertisement by heart, do you know of any one likely

to suit. It will not be an easy post, Mrs. Danvers is a fearful fidget."

" Margaret, would she take me? I am Ursula's pupil you know, and she has been always considered a prodigy of learning. Of course I am not like her, but I think I could fulfil the requirements of that advertisement. Will you speak for me?"

" My dear child, surely there can be no necessity for it?"

" Yes there is, for Charlie's sake," and then Katie told her friend all that was in her mind.

" Are you sure you shall like it; I mean in this place?"

" No, I don't think I shall like it at all, but it is a duty, and sometimes lately, Magsie, I have thought that duties are the angels' wings that will waft us to our own true home at last; and besides, apart from all else I believe work will be good for me. The house is very small, and father spends most of his time at the reading-room, and Ursula is much more independent of me than I ever thought she would be, and when I have done the little bit of house-keeping, and seen my poor people, time sometimes hangs heavily upon my hands, and I am running the risk of getting moody and discontented. You may be quite sure, dear, that this necessity for work is the very best thing that could have happened to me."

" Few sisters would have seen the necessity."

" Yes they would if they had had my experience,"

and Margaret could not understand the expression of hopeless misery that came upon Katie's face. It was gone again in an instant, and when Blanche and Amy came in, they thought they had not seen the girl looking so well for many a long month.

It was pleasant to see Margaret's loving manner to both her young sisters. Amy heartily responded to it, but Blanche was stern, and cold, and abstracted. It seemed in those days as though the girl had changed places with her elder sister.

The Dean was not happy about her. He had learned during the last few months to look into things with keener insight than he had ever done before, and he saw that this engagement, upon which his child insisted, and which he could not prevent, was rather a burden and a weight to her than the happiness it ought to have been.

"I think I should like to have to work myself," said poor Blanche, with a weary sigh, when Katie told them what her business with Margaret was.

"You, Blanche!" answered Amy, "what would Vernon say?"

There was a frown on the fair face, and Amy coloured, and felt she had made a mistake, and as Katie walked home she wondered how it would all end, and whether after all, the whole thing was not a grand mistake.

It was not till she had seen Mrs. Danvers that she told Ursula and Charlie what she had done. She would have liked to have kept it from the latter altogether, but she had to begin her duties

at once, and could not otherwise account for her long absence from home.

Ursula warmly approved of the scheme, but poor Charlie was terribly cut up at the first mention of it.

“Have I anything to do with it?” he asked. “Are you going out grinding five hours every day on my account?”

“Charlie, it will be such a pleasure to do anything for your sake.”

But he would not be reasoned into submission for a long time. He threatened to throw up the whole thing and get a clerkship in a merchant’s office.

“It was an unnatural thing,” he said, “that a woman should work for a man, and he would not stand it.”

By degrees Katie managed to reconcile him into letting her do it, promising she would give it up as soon as he got his promotion; and before he joined his regiment, which was stationed at Southsea, he was made to own that work was really good for her, and that she was better for the regular employment.

“Kittums, if ever I’m a Nabob, I don’t know what I’ll not do for you,” he said, on the last morning before he went away.

“You’ll be good, Charlie, and keep up the family honour, and that will be doing more for me, for all of us, than if you presented us with the mines of Golconda.”

"I'll try," answered the young ensign, "and Kittums, if there's any good in me, if I ever do anything to make you feel you are not ashamed of my ugly phiz, remember next to all mother taught me, I owe it to you. I might have gone to the bad at school long ago, if you hadn't shown me the example you did."

"Charlie, you silly boy," but as Katie kissed the soldier lad's cheek, there was a strange thrill of happiness at her heart.

Day after day she went on with her self-imposed duties, and the little house in High Street was getting more like home, than she had ever thought it would have been. Ursula was keeping pretty well, her father was cheerful, and there came constant letters from Charlie telling of his happiness, and less frequent ones from the big boys in Australia, announcing their intention of coming home for a few months at no very distant time, and Leila wrote long epistles that did them all good to read.

On one occasion Charlie's weekly missive was of unusual length. He was not much of a scribe, and generally scrawled over half a sheet, and thought he was to be highly commended, but now he had a piece of news to tell.

"I was walking on the pier with another fellow, when I saw an old lady in a green bonnet gazing upon me admiringly. I meekly returned the gaze, and then I knew that there could not be another such set of flaxen curls in all England, so I smiled

and took off my hat, and she came forward and held out her hand, and said, I was more like Uncle Walter than ever ; and lo and behold, here I have found the flame of my school-boy days, Miss Griselda Martin. She is staying here for the benefit of salt water for her dog or her parrot, I don't know which, and she asked me to dinner, and I went, and she insisted upon knowing all about everything and everybody, and I found myself talking to her as if I had known her all my life. I even told her how noble you had been, Kittums, and what you were doing for me now, and she blew her nose, and rubbed her spectacles, and sent you her love, and I am to go and see her very often, and I like her awfully."

After this Charlie often wrote about Miss Griselda, always telling of her kindness to him and of her inquiries for them all.

And then came the news that she had left Southsea, and she had asked him to go and see her at Christmas in her own home in one of the midland counties, "and Kittums, you are to come too, she wants to make your acquaintance."

"You must go, dearest," said Ursula, "the change will do you good, and I can take care of father, and of myself too."

"We will see about it when the time comes, dear. It will not do to make plans so long beforehand."

But when Christmas came she went down with Charlie for two days, and came home to find that

all had gone on rightly during her absence, and her father and Ursula made as much of her as though she had been away a month, they were so charmed to get their treasure home again.

"She is a dear old lady, Ursula, and I never saw anything like her fondness for our Charlie, and he is very good and respectful to her. It is quaint to see him with her; do you know, Ursie, I should not wonder if some day or other, of course one does not like to think of it, Charlie would be a rich man."

And Ursula only smiled and said, she thought if it were so that the boy would know how to make a good use of his money.

That Christmas-tide brought many blessings with it—in Ursula's improved health, in her father's cheerfulness, in Margaret's affection, Katie saw much for which she had to give thanks; there was one thing more too that seemed to come as a special gift to her in those dark December days—one thing that gave her great pleasure, and yet a sharp keen pang of pain. Harry wrote to her; a long letter as one of her own brothers might have written, telling her how he had thought of her in her sorrow, and how he rejoiced with her in her joy about Ursula; then came a long description of Florence, and of his gay doings in the beautiful city, and afterwards a little bit about Northminster and the dear old Cathedral; there were Christmas greetings to them all, and at the end were a few words for herself. "Katie, Ursula is better, will that

make any difference? I will come home and take a farm, do anything, if you will only give me a hope; and your people could live with us, and my life would be given up to make you happy."

And she wrote, "It can never be different, Harry; but I thank you, and bless you for your goodness. Please forget me, and learn to be happy without me, for my answer must be the same as it was a year ago."

The next she heard of Harry was, that he was going to India, and Margaret's face, when she made the announcement, told her that she guessed the reason of his sudden resolve.

"Oh, Katie dear, if things could have been different!"

"Margaret, some day, perhaps, when all that is dark will be made clear, you will know my reasons for acting as I have done."

And Margaret could not but trust that even yet all that now seemed so wrong would come right.

"Right it must be, whatever happens," she mused, "for I know the child's honest hearty purpose, and I know too where all her trust is placed, and where her strength is found."

Very quietly, with strange monotony, but all the more quickly, the days passed on in the house in the High Street, and winter brightened into spring, and spring into summer, and one glad June day two tall fine young men walked up to the door, and Maria gave a little scream of delight, and Frank and Harold, the big boys, were ushered into their

father's and Ursula's presence ; and in came old Thomas, half mad with joy, he had seen the visitors walk up to the door, and recognized them in a moment, and after he had talked to them for two or three minutes he asked to be allowed to go and fetch Miss Katie home ; it didn't seem fair, he said, that she shouldn't be there to see the young gentlemen as soon as possible.

Mrs. Danvers of course could not do less than proclaim a whole holiday, when the old man, with an air of supreme importance, told his news, and oh how Katie sped along the quiet streets, leaving Thomas to hobble behind her, and what a joyful meeting that was with those dear big boys.

They were at home three months ; they could not leave their sheep any longer, they said, and they made the dark gloomy house bright with their fun and merriment, and Ursula and Katie saw that beneath all the noise and nonsense there was an under current of deep religious feeling, that those years in the wilds of Australia had but strengthened the old home teaching ; the absence of Church privileges made them prize the beautiful services all the more.

“ When we go back we are going to begin building a Church,” said Frank, “ and the Bishop is going to send us a clergyman.”

It was a joke in the family that the big boys never spoke of themselves in the singular—it was always *we* ; “ we mean to do this, we mean to do that.”

They were always welcome at the Deanery ; the dear old Dean delighted in their society, and the sisters sometimes used to think that Frank or Harold, they could not make out which, found some special attraction in the old oak panelled library, where Blanche and Amy were generally to be found.

One evening, just about a month before the time fixed for them to go back to Australia, the brothers appeared in the little sitting-room in which their father, and Ursula, and Katie were sitting at tea.

“We are late, we are afraid,” said Frank.

“Yes, indeed you are ; what have you been doing with yourselves ?”

They laughed merrily, and Frank looked at Harold, and Harold at Frank, and at last the younger brother spoke.

“We have found a wife to take back with us.”

“Found a wife, my dear boys ! who, which of you ?”

“Frank, to be sure,” said Harold ; “she says she knows she shall like the life in the bush ; and the Dean has given his consent, and it’s all settled, only Margaret says it will be a scrimmage to get her ready.”

Then Frank came forward, and sat by his father’s side. “We hardly meant to do it to-day, father, although we have thought of it for some time, but Harold stayed to talk to Margaret and Blanche, and I went out with her into the garden to look at the ferns, and it all came out almost before I knew

what I was about ; I could not help telling her I had loved her ever since the first day I saw her, and she said—" and Frank coloured crimson, and Ursula came to the rescue.

"It is all right, Frank dear, Katie and I have seen it for a long time ; we knew one of you would try and take Amy Melville back with you, and we are very glad, very thankful ; you will like little Amy for a daughter, will you not, father dear?"

"Yes, my dear, very much ; and we must have a grand wedding—grander than poor Leila's was."

It was a short bright happy courtship, with only the thought of the parting to cast a shadow on it, and the wedding was as grand as Mr. Howard could possibly desire ; the breakfast, reversing the usual order of things, was given at the Deanery, for the little sitting-room in the High Street would not have held half the invited guests. Amy was very tearful during the ceremony, and fairly broke down during her father's speech, but when Frank whispered, "You don't repent, do you, darling?" she lifted a face all bright with smiles to his, and said, "No, indeed ! oh, Frank, I know it is silly to cry, but if *you* were going to leave me I should be ever so much worse."

So Frank took his bride to the Isle of Wight, and Harold remained at home for a few days, and then he and the Dean and Margaret travelled to Gravesend together, the two latter to see the ship in which the voyagers were going out, and to bid Amy good-bye.

“ You will be very happy I am sure, Amy,” said Margaret, as her young sister clung to her, weeping bitterly.

“ Oh, yes, I am happy ; but, Margaret, only say that you forgive all the past, and let Blanche be a comfort to you now.”

“ The last year has been a very peaceful one to me, dearest, and you have helped to make it so ; as for the past, there were faults on both sides, and we will not talk of it now. Only, Amy darling, you will not forget us in your far-away home ?”

“ No, no, never.”

“ Amy, my child, GOD have you in His holy keeping for ever.”

“ Father, pray for me, think of me always.”

“ I will, my darling, in Church above all.” And the Dean gave his child a last long kiss, and shook hands with Frank and Harold.

Frank could not speak, but Harold murmured, “ We will take great care of her, sir,” and so they left her standing on the deck between her husband and his brother, and sad though it was to feel that she was gone, there was no fear or foreboding for the future upon the father’s or sister’s mind.

The fear and foreboding were reserved for the young sister at home, for poor misguided Blanche, fighting, as they saw she was fighting, against what she knew to be right.

For all during those summer months Vernon Heathcote had not been near her, and they heard of him from others, taking his pleasure here, there,

little wooden cross, which had been her mother's present on the last birthday that she was with her child, she asked from the depths of a humble, penitent, contrite heart, that the false pride, (for she saw now that it was pride,) that had hindered her for so long, might be taken away, and that in its place might come a childlike trust, a more chastened, resigned spirit.

Early in the morning she was in the Cathedral she loved so well, asking for renewed strength and courage : and afterwards she stood in her father's study, and told him all that she had told Harry the night before.

He was very merciful in his judgment of them all, speaking tenderly, as her mother would have done, to *her* : thanking her for all her care of him and of his "little ones," scarcely dwelling upon the hardness which she confessed had been her stumbling-block, and yet very gentle when he talked of Blanche and Amy.

"My child," he said, "perhaps I have not been watchful enough over all of you. I have been too abstracted, too absorbed in my books, and in my work : we have all had a lesson, Maggie ; God grant that it may not have been given us in vain. As regards Blanche, I must be guided by what young Heathcote says : I don't like him much. I never did, and what I have heard of him lately has not been much to his credit : but I can decide nothing hastily, I must make inquiries, and if there is really nothing wrong, nothing but youthful folly, why

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and everywhere, able apparently to find time for everything but a visit to Northminster.

And yet Blanche would not hear one word said against him.

“ My child, it does not augur well for your future happiness,” the Dean had said to her once, when some people had come in and announced that they had met young Heathcote on his way to the Newmarket races.

“ That must be my own look-out, father,” she had answered proudly. “ You promised that you would say nothing for two years.”

“ I know I did, my child,” and the loving father sighed a weary sigh, for he knew that at the end of the appointed time he should have to say that which would make his wilful daughter very sad. He was spared the pain ; in the summer that followed Amy’s wedding, Vernon Heathcote himself broke off the engagement. He wrote a cold hard letter, saying that he had felt for a long time that he and Blanche were not suited to each other, and that they had better give each other up. She lifted up her head then, and bore it bravely, although it was easy for those about her to see how bitterly she sorrowed.

Two months afterwards Vernon’s marriage to an heiress was announced in the papers. It was a salutary cure, a wholesome though most hard discipline ; poor Blanche took her sorrow to Him Who alone can bind up the wounds of the broken-hearted, and when the first few days of wounded

pride and humiliation were over she went up to Margaret and said, "Maggie, teach me to be good; make me what I ought to have been all through these long wasted years." And Margaret could only think of the words of the Psalm, "It is good for me that I have been in trouble."



CHAPTER XIII.

SISTER BLANCHE.

“ The last sweet hymn has died away,
The awful rite is o'er,
And she is now a Bride of CHRIST,
His love for evermore.”

IN the autumn days that came after that summer that had been so full of sadness to Blanche, there was great sorrow in many a home in Northminster.

Down in the low part of the city near the river, typhoid fever in its worst form appeared, and ere a week had elapsed there was hardly a house in which there was not one dead.

The poor things were panic-struck ; for the sickness seemed to come without any apparent warning, and was raging amongst them almost before they quite realised that it was there.

Margaret Melville did her best for them ; day and night she was at the bedside of some poor sick or dying creature, speaking words of hope and comfort, sending for the clergy to come and

administer the last Sacrament to those who were entering upon the dark valley of the shadow of death.

The Dean soon saw the urgent need of more help ; he telegraphed to a nursing Sisterhood, and the next day two Sisters arrived at Northminster to take upon themselves the care of the fever-stricken patients.

Margaret worked with them still, and with her was some one else, a fair girl whom none of the poor had ever seen in their homes before, but whom many of them recognised now, as one of the Dean's young ladies.

" Margaret, I am coming with you," Blanche had said one morning as her sister was starting for her day's work.

" Blanche, dear, it will be too much for you, indeed I don't think you are fit for it."

" Fit for it !" and there was no common bitterness in the tone, " I suppose I am not ; there is not much that I am fit for, but Margaret, if you love me, let me for once in my life try and do something for others."

" I meant, dearest, that I thought you were physically unfit for such work as this ; you hardly realise what it is, Blanche."

" Let me try, at any rate ; if I cannot do it, I can but leave it."

So those two went out together, and together they worked on day after day, until at last the pestilence was stayed, and the prayers that had

been offered up daily from all the Churches in Northminster were answered.

How Blanche had laboured amongst them only the Sisters and Margaret could tell; sometimes she shrank from the strange sad sights to which she was so little accustomed, and then the momentary weakness was over, and she went back to her work, "strong and very courageous," in a strength not her own.

And when all was over, when the Sisters carrying with them the blessings of rich and poor had gone away to minister to others, when the dark November days had dawned, and the gloom of winter was falling upon Northminster, then one evening Blanche stood before her father as he sat in his study, and said,

"Father dear, may I speak to you?"

"Yes, my darling," and the Dean pushed away his writing and put back his spectacles from his nose upon his silvery hair, and set a chair for Blanche near the fire.

"Father dear, you were going to let me go away from you once; very soon, if things had been as we once thought they would have been, I should have been going to leave you."

"Yes, my dear, I know you would, it is pleasant to have you with us, Blanche, but every day I think of your sorrow and thank God that He has shown you the way to bear it."

"Dear father, I have come this evening to ask if you can spare me."

"Surely, my child ; a change will do you good, and you will come back to us strong and well."

"But I do not mean to come back at all, father, at least, not to live."

The Dean looked startled.

"It is rather soon, is it not, Blanche? who is it, my dear? I have not noticed any one, I have not seen anything."

Blanche smiled the brightest smile that the Dean had seen upon her face for many a month as she answered,

"No, no, it is nothing of that kind, father," and she got up and went and knelt at his feet ; "I want to ask you if the offering of such a life as mine would be acceptable,—a life embittered by a great disappointment, a wasted life for all these two-and-twenty years."

"What do you mean, my child?"

"It has come into my heart lately, since the fever, sometimes I have almost dared to hope that God put the thought there, that I should like to give Him the rest of my life ; I should like to be a Sister of Mercy."

He looked at her for an instant with deep yearning tenderness, and then he laid his hand upon her head, and said,

"My darling, there is no reason why it should not be ; I cannot, dare not, keep you back."

There came a look upon her face of unspeakable joy, and then it was clouded by a shade of doubt.

“ Dear father, I have read lately in some of the books in the library, that those who have aspired to such a life, have given themselves up in the first freshness of their youth, given up all they had to give, before sorrow or disappointment came to them.”

“ Yes, my child, it is so ; and perhaps at the last, in the great Judgment Day, those who gave up the world in its brightness and its freshness may have a higher place than those who learned to love God, because dark days of sorrow had come to them ; but, Blanche dear, the pure Virgin Mother was at the foot of the SAVIOUR’s Cross, and by her side was S. Mary Magdalene, worn out not only by the world’s sorrow, but by the world’s sin : it seems to me that the trouble that brings some of us to Him will be accepted in mercy, as one of the talents rightly used, as one of the seeds of bitterness, that has brought forward a harvest of joy.”

She was satisfied then ; and the Dean himself wrote at her request to the Superior of S. Agatha’s, and asked her to receive his daughter into her home.

Blanche did not go to her new life until after Christmas, and six months afterwards she came back to Northminster for a few days in a Novice’s dress, and with an expression of quiet peace and happiness upon her face that made them all rejoice over her. And afterwards in the years that were to come Sister Blanche was loved and re-

verenced by all who knew her, more especially by the young nieces and nephews who thought that there was no one in all the world half so pretty or half so good.

It had been a great grief to Katie when the fever came, that she had not been allowed to go and help amongst the sick ; but she knew she could not do that, and continue her duties, so she and Ursula used to pray for them, and send little dainties to them, and it was some comfort to hear Sister Ruth say, that they could not have got on at all without that extraneous help.

“We shall have you running off to join them Sisters some day, Miss Katie,” said Maria, when she first heard of Blanche Melville’s resolve ; “ ‘tain’t for me to speak against them, after all the good they’ve done here ; but ‘twould be a sorry day as took you away from us, my dearie, and we could none of us bear it.”

“I could not go,” answered Katie, “I am not fit for it, indeed I am not.”

“You’re fit for anything, Miss Katie, according to my thinking.”

“Yes, I know you have far too good an opinion of me Maria, but believe me you need have no fear of that kind,” and when Maria left the room poor Katie’s head sank upon her hands, and she murmured, “Sometimes I have thought it might be rest and peace to do as Blanche has done ; but for *me* it would be mockery, for the earthly love is

in my heart still, and JESUS when He calls His chosen ones to the higher state asks—not the first place—that by His help I could give, but *all*, every bit, no other thought, no other affection, to come between Him and those who are His Brides on earth."



CHAPTER XIV.

“HE’S A RARE FRENCH SCHOLARD, HE IS.”

“Over the water and over the sea,
Over the water to Charlie.”

Nursery Rhyme.

“THE big boys” had said very little about Duncan during their three months’ visit home. All that Katie knew was that there was a general impression in the colonies that he had gone quite to the bad, and that the accusation of forgery brought against him was a true one ; but the subject was somewhat painful, and Frank and Harold had not seemed to care to speak about it.

It was supposed he had come home, but even the name of the ship in which he had started was uncertain, and there had been several wrecks that year, and it was thought very possible that he was one of the many who had left Australia under a feigned name, and of whom no clue or trace was to be found.

It was evident that all of them, even Ursula,

thought that they should never hear of him again, and only Katie held to the hope that some day or other it might be granted to her to do as her mother had bidden her do, and "be kind to Duncan when he came home."

One morning, two years after little Eva's death, a letter came to the house in the High Street, which gave rise to a great amount of conjecture ; it was a French letter, bearing a French post-mark, and it was addressed to the Grange, to Ursula.

"Somebody who does not know much about us, Katie," she said, as she took it up, and carefully broke the seal ; and then as she read her face grew very white, and tears of mingled sorrow and thankfulness rose to her eyes.

"What is it, dear?" asked Katie, "may I see?"

"Yes, come, and read it with me ; it is from Duncan,—no, not from Duncan exactly, although he has dictated it, his wife has written it."

"Duncan ! Duncan's wife ! oh, Ursula, what does it all mean?"

"I don't know, I can't understand it yet ; read for yourself, Katie."

And then together they read the ill-written, almost unintelligible scrawl.

"DEAREST URSULA,

"Have you forgotten that there is such a being in existence as your unhappy brother? It is

years since I have heard of any of you, and the last news that came to me through the papers was that mother was dead. Did she forgive me before she went away?

"I married a nice little girl before I left Australia, and she has been good and true to me. We have been living in this place more than three years; I, giving English lessons, Mary taking in needlework.

"I would not write before; I would not add to the burdens I had already laid upon my father; but now I am ill,—the doctor says there is little or no hope, and I cannot bear the thought of leaving my wife and my little Eva, amongst strangers in a strange land. Could any one come to me? Oh, you don't know how I long to see one of the old home faces once again, before I die! I have done many wrong things, but I have suffered much, and I have repented.

"My love to all of you.

"Your erring, but loving,
"DUNCAN."

The letter was dated from a street in the little town of Dinan in Brittany.

The sisters read it through twice, and then Ursula looked at Katie, and said,

"What is to be done?"

"I must go to him."

"You, Katie darling? it cannot be."

"Ursula, listen; that Christmas Day when I

first knew that mother was going from us, she spoke to me of Duncan for the first time, and asked me, if ever he came home, to be kind and loving to him."

"Ah, yes, but it is so far away in a strange land, —if Charlie could but go with you."

"That is impossible ; you know he was to go to Hythe yesterday, and he could not get leave now ; it would not be right to ask it."

"Then you must take Maria."

"No, indeed ; she is necessary to father and to you."

"There is no one else that I can see ; Margaret could not leave the Dean."

At this moment Maria came in to clear away the breakfast things, and seeing the troubled look on her mistress' faces, she made bold to ask if there was any bad news.

They told her what news had come, and what their present difficulty was.

"I can go alone, Ursula dear, indeed I can."

"My darling, I should be so wretched—"

"If you please, young ladies, what do you think of Thomas ? he's a rare French scholard, he is."

It was a new idea ; one that made them smile when it was first suggested, and they put it away as not feasible ; but it came back afterwards, assuming a tangible shape, and in half an hour from the receipt of Duncan's letter the old coachman was sent for, and admitted into the sisters' confidence.

"I'd go to the world's end to see Master Duncan again," said the poor fellow, sobbing for joy; "they was all fine young gentlemen, all of them; but there was never one of them comed up to him; to see him on his pony, following the hounds when he was ever so small a chap, was a sight worth seeing, I never seed nothing like it afore or since."

"And, Thomas, you speak French, don't you?" asked Katie, anxiously.

"Well, Miss Katie, I can make the Frenchmen understand me; there was one dirty little 'oss dealer, as comed to the Grange years agone, and he wanted to buy Mermaid, the beautiful black mare; he wouldn't take no for an answer; the Squire kept on saying, '*Nong, mounseer.*' At last he went away, and then if he didn't have the imperence to come up to me in the street one day when I was waiting at a shop for the mistress, and begin again about Mermaid, and I minded the Squire's words, and I shook my fist at him, and screamed out as loud as I could, '*Nong, mounseer,*' and didn't he just jump away like a frightened hare? and ever since that, if one of them dirty, nasty, little Frenchmen has spoken to me, I've just spoke all the language I know, and they've left me alone."

Ursula and Katie laughed heartily, and the laugh did them good; then Bradshaw was consulted, and routes discussed, and it was finally settled that Katie and her escort were to start that afternoon

by the five o'clock train for Southampton, and from thence take the midnight boat to S. Malo, and on in the morning to Dinan.

"And, Miss Katie, you'll not bother about the money, I've got a little bit in a canvas bag all in gold, and you can just let me pay everything, and if they wants to cheat won't I just '*Nong, mounseer*' them!"

And Katie could only say, "Thank you, Thomas," for her heart was very full at the old man's generosity and delicacy of feeling, and she would not for the world hurt him by refusing his offer then, although of course she determined that he should be repaid at some future time.

It was a busy morning in the house in the High Street, Ursula and Maria putting together all the delicacies they could think of for the invalid, and Katie packing up her own wardrobe into as small a compass as possible, and snatching half an hour to go and see the Dean and Margaret, and to explain to Mrs. Danvers that it was uncertain when she should be home again.

The children clung about her and entreated her not to be away long, they could not do without her, they said ; and her heart was very full of a quiet, thankful joy, as she knelt before the Altar of the Cathedral, and asked God to be with her to her journey's end.

Duncan was found, that was enough for her ; the prayer of long years was answered, the mother's wish about to be fulfilled. She hardly realised

that he said in his letter that he was dying ; it was a cause for infinite thanksgiving to know that through GOD'S Mercy she should see him once again.

They did not tell Mr. Howard whither she was bound. "She is going away for a few days to see a sick friend," Ursula had said to him, and he was quite satisfied with the explanation, and only hoped she would not be away long.

"God bless and keep you, my dearest one, and oh, if you can bring Duncan home what joy it will be ;" and Ursula, standing in the doorway, bade her young sister a loving farewell.

We need not describe the journey ; it was a fine night, but even fine nights do not prevent *mal de mer*, and Katie, perfectly well herself, heartily wished her journey at an end.

Poor old Thomas ! it was his first glimpse of the sea, and when he presented himself before his young mistress, as the steamer was entering the port of S. Malo in the morning, he was a piteous object to behold.

"I should have been all right if it hadn't been for one of those Mounseers with his bad baccy," he said,—"'twasn't the sea at all that did for me, 'twas the dirty Frenchman."

He very soon revived however under the influence of seeing a crowd of porters and *gendsarmes* make their way on to the deck. Then began a scene the like of which Katie had never seen before ; screaming, gesticulating, swearing, as only

our neighbours across the Channel can scream, and gesticulate, and swear ; *garçons* thrusting into the hands of the bewildered English passengers the cards of their respective hotels, and describing the perfections of each in voluble terms ; *cochers* entreating every one to take a drive ; all equally resentful when their offers were refused, but apparently quite convinced of the futility of their efforts, as far as Katie was concerned, by the stentorian "*Nong, mounseer*" from the very quaint-looking old man, who stood guarding his young mistress with such jealous care.

At last the landing was accomplished, the wretched custom-house business got through, poor Katie's box mercilessly opened and its contents pulled about, Thomas' "*Nong, mounseer*" falling all unheeded upon the ears of the officials of the Douane.

An old gentleman on board the steamer had told Katie the best way of getting to Dinan ; "the steamer up the Rance is the most pleasant and picturesque," he said, "but it is sometimes very long, and you appear anxious to arrive at your destination."

"Yes, indeed I am."

"Then, if I might be allowed to advise, you had better get some breakfast directly you land, and then take the little steamer across to Dinard, there at eleven o'clock you will find a diligence which will take you on to Dinan in an hour and a half."

She was only too thankful for any hints as to the best means of accomplishing her journey, and she went with Thomas to an hotel and ordered breakfast, and whilst it was getting ready she walked with the old man through the quaint old fortified town, just gazing from the ramparts at the blue sea sparkling in all the bright beauty of the sweet summer morning, and at the little island which the poet Chateaubriand had begged from his fellow-citizens as his last resting-place,—the ocean which had spoken to him with ceaseless voice during his life plashing against his grave now, singing a low sad requiem to his memory.

Then on their way back to the hotel she heard a bell going, and she turned to Thomas and said,

“I must go into the Church for a minute.”

“Then, miss, I'll wait for you here, I couldn't encourage them Papist Mounseers.”

She did not keep him very long ; she had not time to examine the building with all its mixed architecture, she made her way to a little side chapel, where a Priest was saying Mass, there she said her prayers, and when she went out again into the busy streets she felt calmed and strengthened by those few quiet moments in GOD'S House, after all the turmoil of the night, and the early morning.

The breakfast was not a lengthy meal ; Thomas had his, at a side table, and made most grotesque faces at everything that was offered him. “They're

all frogs, Miss Katie, I'm sure," he said, "done up in different ways with some of their nasty French messes."

He was gracious enough to say that "the coffee warn't bad, although it didn't do after Maria's coffee;" and Katie could not help being intensely amused at everything she saw, and her spirits rose when she mounted the banquette of the diligence, and felt getting nearer to Duncan at every step the strong clumsy horses took.

Thomas' indignation at the sight of these animals knew no bounds. The harness called forth his severest censures, and Katie was really thankful when he went off into a sound sleep, and left her to her own thoughts.

"Voilà Dinan," said the good-natured coachman at last; "où est-ce que Mademoiselle veut descendre?"

Katie explained to him that the address was Rue de l'Horloge; and with a grunt and a significant "*bien!*" he drove some of the other passengers to their destinations, and proceeded to whip his horses on through a number of narrow circuitous streets until he stopped at a low door just in front of a huge clock.

"English gentleman sick," he said, trying to speak intelligibly; "going dead."

Poor Katie! she had been dreaming a dream of happiness that might be in store for them all, when the *cocher's* words brought her back to the stern realities of life.

The English gentleman could be none other than Duncan, and he was dying.

"Thomas," she said, "here we are, you have been asleep."

"Asleep! no, Miss Katie; who could sleep in such a shandydan?"



CHAPTER XV.

ONLY A LITTLE FAIR CHILD.

“ I here protest in sight of heaven,
And by the hope I have of heavenly bliss,
That I am clear from this misdeed.”

King Henry VI.

“ **N**OW then, Miss Katie, mind how you get down from this here disgraceful vehicle ; out of the way, little one, or you'll be hurt.”

“ No, I shan't,” was the answer, “ no, I shan't, you funny old man,” and Katie turned to look at the speaker, and as she did so, it seemed just for a minute, as though her heart ceased beating ; old Thomas too held on to the wheel for support.

What was it that had such a strange effect upon them both ? Only a little fair child, with a bright colour and blue eyes, and curls of golden hair falling in rich luxuriance from beneath her little quaint French cotton cap.

“ My little one, will you tell me your name ? ” said Katie, drawing the child towards her.

“ My name is Eva, Eva Howard.”

Then Katie took her up into her arms and kissed her, and handed her over to Thomas, and he kissed too, a proceeding which the young lady resented by kicking violently, and holding out her arms to go back to Katie.

“Eva, my little Eva, I am your aunt, your own aunt, will you not speak to me?”

“Are you Aunt Ursula, or Aunt Leila, or Aunt Katie?” said the child, showing that she knew the names at least, of all her relatives.

“I am Aunt Katie.”

“And where is my Aunt Eva?”

“My darling, she has gone to the Angels.”

A grave awed look came upon the little face. “We thought papa was going there yesterday; Monsieur le Curé told me to ask that he might, but the doctor has been, and he says he won’t go yet, he’ll stay with Maman, and with me, perhaps for a little while, perhaps for a long time, perhaps always.”

The child’s words sent a thrill of unspeakable joy to Katie’s heart.

“Will you take me to your papa and your maman now, Eva?”

“Yes, this way; but who is that funny old man?”

“He is a dear friend of mine and of your papa’s.”

“Are you Thomas?” said the child, lifting her sweet blue eyes to the old wrinkled face, “if you are, I love you, and I will not call you a funny old man any more.”

It may have been that in the future those eyes of Miss Eva's were destined to win many a heart ; but never was conquest so complete and entire as the one achieved over old Thomas then—he was her devoted slave from that moment until the day of his death.

"Eva," cried a clear girlish voice, "where are you, petite?"

"Here, maman, with Aunt Katie and Thomas ;" and then a brown head disappeared from the window, and the door was opened by a young woman, scarcely more than a girl, who stood blushing and smiling on the threshold.

"You are Duncan's wife, I know," said Katie, kissing her ; "Eva says he is better."

"Yes, the doctor said to-day that perhaps he would get well. Will you come to him now? he will hear the voices, and he will fidget."

Katie followed her up the old winding staircase, whilst Eva pulled Thomas into the kitchen.

"Duncan, I have brought your sister to you."

Duncan opened his eyes dreamily, and then a bright pleased wondering smile came upon the wan haggard face.

"Mother," he said, "kiss me, and say you forgive."

"Duncan dearest, she did forgive ; it was her last wish that you should come home to us again."

He sat up now, and Katie could see what he was like ; she had but a vague indistinct remembrance of the Duncan of old, but she had heard of his rare

beauty, and often seen his likeness, and she could trace no resemblance to the handsome noble-looking youth in the haggard prematurely old man, who could boast of just sufficient of the family features to assure her that it was really her brother.

He did not speak, he could not, and she went up to him and kissed him and said, "Duncan, I am Katie, I have come with old Thomas to take you home."

"Home to the old Grange?"

"Home to Northminster."

He was satisfied then, and once more he closed his eyes, and sat with his hand in his sister's for a long time; then he sent for Thomas, and the old man bore up bravely at the sight of his loved young master, and even ventured to suggest that a canter across the Northminster downs would make a man of him, in a very short time.

After a time Duncan went to sleep, and Katie made acquaintance with her sister-in-law; she found her a loving amiable girl, wholly uneducated, except for the little teaching her husband had given her since they married; she spoke of him with blind devotion, and it was evident to Katie that whatever his faults had been, as a husband and father he had been exemplary. Her letter to Ursula was full of a new hope and joy, "We will have him home soon, Ursie dearest; and surely *she* can see us, and rejoice over the wanderer's return."

From that day Duncan gained strength rapidly;

he was not allowed to talk much, and the doctor said his wife was a better companion for him than his sister, Katie's presence seemed an encouragement to conversation.

Monsieur le Curé, as little Eva called him, visited the invalid every day; the people of the house had sent for him when Duncan was supposed to be dying, and the old man had been very good and kind; not seeking in any way to proselytise, but speaking only of those saving truths of religion which we must all hold in common.

Katie used to wander about along the river's bank, sometimes alone, sometimes with Eva and old Thomas, and now that Duncan seemed really getting better she could revel in the lovely scenery and gaze with delight at the grand old feudal walls which seemed to rise straight up from the smiling river, and at the little villages nestling in the peaceful valleys.

"Thomas, is it not lovely?" she would say sometimes.

"Well, I can't say as I sees much in it, miss, it's nothing to our Cathedral."

As for Eva, the whole current of her little life seemed changed; she had been lonely enough before her aunt and Thomas came, she had had no one to play with, no one to order about, and now all day long Thomas was there ready to be a horse or a donkey, or anything the imperious little maiden chose to call him.

Katie sometimes wondered how far it was good

for the child, but comforted herself with the idea, that there would be a break to it, when they got back to England.

“Duncan,” she said one evening to her brother, “the doctor says we may go home in a week,” and then for the first time she told him that it was not to the old Grange they were going, but to a small house in the High Street.

He did not answer for a minute, he only turned away from her and groaned ; and then in a husky voice he said,

“It was not my fault that you left, was it, Katie ?”

“No, not wholly, indeed very little ; father speculated, and was unsuccessful, and you know, dear Duncan, in the old days he never knew the value of money.”

He seemed satisfied with her answer, and he turned to her again and looked searchingly into her face as he said,

“Did you ever hear anything about me, that made you think I had dishonoured our name ?”

It was no use to try and evade the question with those deep searching eyes of his fixed upon her.

“Yes, we heard something a long long time ago.”

“Katie, it was not true, I have done many wrong things in my life, but, believe me, I never did that ; I had a friend, one who had rescued me from death, and in a moment of temptation he forged the name, and I got the credit of it. I was just married, and I bolted,—to have stood a trial would have been

to convict him, and that I could not do : he died a year ago, sending me the confession of his guilt. I believe my name appeared in only one paper, and I have only thought lately, that in some way the false accusation might have brought trouble upon some of you."

"Dear Duncan, no one but ourselves ever knew it,—the big boys were obliged to write it lest we should see it suddenly."

"I am glad ; thankful that it has done no harm."

She kissed him, and went away, for she was glad too, and thankful, oh, how thankful. She wandered on through the quiet streets into the old Church, and there as the soft moonbeams fell upon the stone pillars with a holy light, she knelt and poured out her heart in one intense fervent thanksgiving.

She did not think of the future, that must be as God willed it, but the stain was removed from their name, there was no shadow of dishonour now upon their fair fame, and oh the weight that was taken from the true, loving, loyal nature.

"They will be so glad," she mused ; "perhaps not quite as glad as I am ; and yet it may be foolish of me to think of *that* ; I dare say he has forgotten me, I dare say he will never come back to care to hear that it was all a mistake."

Another week, and the steamer that had carried that happy party from S. Malo arrived in Southampton docks.

“Here you are,” said a hearty, cheery voice, and Charlie went forward to where his brother stood.

“I came to meet you, I thought I might be a help; but who is this?” as there danced up to him a bright little child, with blue eyes and golden hair; and then he stooped to kiss her and said, “Little Eva, you must be very good, for you are so like her.”

“I mean to be good, Thomas says I am to comfort the family, and I mean to do so,” and the little one drew herself up with an air of conscious dignity, which was irresistibly comical.

“She’s like her in everything,” said Charlie to Katie, “even to those old-fashioned ways of hers.”

“Yes, sometimes it is almost too trying to be with her,—but I shouldn’t say that, with our little one with the Angels, and this little sunbeam here; surely God has been very good to us.”

And Charlie whispered, “Kittums, dear old Kittums, one thing I thank Him for every day, and that is, for giving you to us.”



CHAPTER XVI.

“MISS GRISELDA IS DEAD.”

“There the water-lilies open,
Lying on the sea of glass.”

“FATHER, Duncan is coming home.”

Ursula, leaning upon the stick which she was obliged always to use, was standing at the window, eager, anxious, expectant. Mr. Howard was walking nervously up and down the little room, wondering what it was that was causing so unusual a bustle in the well-ordered establishment.

“What did you say, my dear?”

“I said, father, that Duncan was coming home to-day, he and his wife and child; Katie and Charlie are bringing them to us, he has been very ill, dear; he has suffered very much, and now he is coming back to us to be taken care of; you will be glad to see him, will you not?”

There was a light in the vacant eyes, and just a little quivering about the mouth, and there was something very touching in the way in which the

old man laid his hand upon his daughter's shoulder and said,

"Ursula, my dear, your mother told me before she went away from us, that I was to be very kind to my son Duncan when he came home; and he is coming home to-day, you say. Yes, I shall be very glad indeed to see him, he is welcome to his father's house."

There was the rattling of a cab in the quiet street, and all that Ursula could see was a sweet childish face looking about her wonderingly, and she knew then that a new sunbeam had come to them to brighten all their lives.

They none of them afterwards could remember what happened at that meeting, how before any of them knew it, Duncan was in the room, and Thomas was giving Eva into her grandfather's arms. All they heard was a husky, broken voice saying, "Father, will you have me at home again?" and the answer spoken clearly and distinctly, "Yes, my boy, I only wish your mother had lived to see this day."

"Grandpapa, Thomas says I'm to comfort you, will you let me?"

The old man fairly broke down then, and tears—the first they had seen there for many a long day—rolled down his cheeks.

"Ursula," he said, "I want to thank God for His goodness to me to-day."

The Cathedral bell was ringing for Evensong, and he took his hat and stick from their place and

walked out, and they knew he had gone *there* to give thanks for the mercy that had come to him ; they none of them spoke, it was so solemn and so strange, and at last Eva grew impatient and carried off Thomas to show her the house, and then the others drew round Duncan, who had been placed upon the sofa, and there was a little talk about his health and their journey, and after a time Ursula and Katie left the husband and wife together and went up stairs.

Then Katie knelt at her sister's feet and sobbed out, "Ursula, dear Ursula, there is no dishonour upon our name ; he never forged that bill, he bore the accusation because the man who did it had saved his life."

"Katie, my darling, it seems almost too much, all this joy coming at once."

"Yes, indeed it is, sometimes I have wondered what we have done to deserve such happiness."

"My dear, we have done nothing, only we trusted, Katie, and God's Mercy has not failed us."

Two more days and Katie went back to her work ; there was more reason than ever now, she said, that she should earn a little more money. The others settled down quietly into their new life ; Duncan walking about with his father, and well content to be spoilt and petted by his wife and his sisters ; Mary doing all she could for every one, winning all their hearts by her gentleness and unobtrusiveness, Eva lording it over the whole household like a little queen.

One morning old Thomas appeared in the doorway, his face wreathed with smiles. “Miss Eva,” he said, “look out of the window.”

The child needed no second bidding, and the next minute a shout of wild delight rang through the room. Every one thronged round her to see the cause of her excitement, and there, standing at the door, was a tiny Shetland pony, ready saddled for a lady.

“Whose is it, Thomas?” said Duncan.

“Miss Eva’s, sir; I hopes you’ll not think it a liberty, but I’ve been a-pining for something to groom this long time, and Steeples down at the Dragon wanted to part with the little beast, and I bought it, and I’m going to keep it in the old stable at the back of my place, and Miss Eva can ride upon it all day if she likes, and I’ll walk by her side.”

“And canter and gallop too, Thomas,” said the child.

“Yes, miss, anything you like.”

“Ask him if he’ll take you and the pony up to the moon,” said Charlie, “he’s sure to say yes.”

But Eva drew herself up with dignity. “You must not laugh at Thomas, Uncle Charlie, indeed you must not; it is because I’m like my own little Aunt Eva who has gone to the Angels that he is so kind to me;” and then the merry child ran to the door, and Thomas followed to help her upon her new steed.

Her mother ran after her with her hat and jacket,

and off she went with her old slave running by her side, just, as Duncan said, as though she had been used to ride upon a pony all her life.

Margaret was happy in Katie's happiness in those days; sometimes she used to wonder what it was that really had made such a difference in the girl, what it was that had brought back the Katie of old with all the bright joyousness of those far-away days.

For Margaret had known nothing but what all the rest of the world knew about Duncan, and therefore she could not realise the great weight that had been taken from her friend's heart.

She often spoke of Harry now; he was getting on wonderfully well in India, and did not talk of coming home at present. "I hope he will not delay it too long," she would sometimes say with a sigh as she looked at the dear old Dean's bent form and silvery locks. And Katie did not turn from the subject as she would formerly have done, she knew now that whatever the future might bring forth, she could think of Harry now without fearing to bring disgrace upon him.

One day Margaret looked into her face in the old searching way, and said,

"Katie, if he were to ask the question over again now, would your answer still be the same?"

And Katie turned away her head and said,

"I don't suppose he will ever ask it, if he does he shall know the truth;" and then, as though afraid she had said too much, she laid her hand

entreatingly on Margaret's arm and begged her not to say one word that could make him think she had changed ; “ for indeed it would be of no use, I could never leave father and Ursula.”

Margaret promised obedience, but that night she wrote a short letter to her brother.

“ DEAREST HARRY,

“ If you could come home without much inconvenience, I wish you would ; the dear father is getting very old and feeble, and he does so long to see his boy again.

“ Ever your loving

“ MAGSIE.”

She had had it in her mind often before to do this, but she had dreaded the pain it might be to him to come to Northminster. Now she felt sure that the great obstacle to his happiness, whatever it was, was removed, and she laughed at herself as she put her letter into the letter-box, and said,

“ I feel younger to-night than I have felt for many long years.”

For she never doubted for an instant that Harry would come home at once.

Meanwhile Duncan was getting quite strong and well, and as a necessary consequence, very impatient of his lazy, inactive life.

“ I cannot bear to be a burden upon them all,” he said to his wife, “ and there is nothing for me to do here.”

“Let us go back to Australia, dear.”

“The parting with the child would kill my father.”

“Could we leave her behind? it might be better for a time; she must be made a more clever woman than her mother is.”

“If she is as good, and true, and unselfish, I shall not mind,” answered Duncan, giving his little wife a hearty kiss. “But Mary, how could we ever part with our darling?”

“If it is best for her, and a comfort to your dear old father, we shall have strength to bear it, Duncan; but we will say nothing about it just yet. We must wait for a few days until the next Australian mail comes in, and we hear what your brothers say about the state of things out there.”

Another week, and one evening there was a knock at the door, and Charlie, pale and grave, and yet with something of a look of triumph upon his face, stood in the midst of the family circle.

“Charlie, dear, we were wondering why you did not write. It is more than a fortnight since we heard from you.”

“I know it is, I have been away on leave, I have been very busy.”

“On leave, and without telling us anything about it! Where have you been? at Miss Griselda’s?”

“I have been at Woodlands; Miss Griselda is dead,” and there was real, earnest sorrow in the young soldier’s tone.

“Dead, how ! When was it?”

“More than ten days ago. By some mischance the announcement did not get into the ‘Times,’ it will not be there until to-morrow. It was very sudden ; she was found by her maid with her Bible open on the table before her, and when the doctor came he said she had been gone more than two hours.”

They none of them spoke. She had been a kind, true friend to Charlie, and they mourned her for his sake, Katie a little bit for her own, for she had taken a great fancy to the eccentric old lady during those two days she had spent with her brother at Woodlands.

They saw there was more to tell. Charlie stood with his back against the mantelpiece, and his voice was choky and tremulous when he spoke again. “I was telegraphed for. She had no relations in the world, only a few old servants, to whom she has left legacies, but the bulk of her fortune has come to me.”

Mr. Howard looked up.

“Eh, Charlie, what is it ? What does it mean ?”

“It means, father, that when I was here last, I heard a rumour that Mr. Sparkes would be glad to get rid of the Grange, it is more than he can manage. I have been in correspondence with Heathcote, and I left him five minutes ago, father. The old place is yours again if you will take it from me.”

There was a great sob. The old Squire understood it all, and grasped his boy's hand.

"And Duncan, will you take care that it does not all go to ruin? Will you be my father's steward?"

"No, Charlie, certainly not, you must be that."

"Not I. I have no fancy for pigs and cows. Fighting, if I could get the chance of a fight, is more to my taste; anyhow I don't mean to leave the service, I like it far too well."

They could none of them realize that it was all really true. They talked about it to each other, and Katie tried to impress the fact upon Eva, but was so vague upon the subject, that the child ran off to ask Thomas what it all meant. And perhaps what made it more real to them than anything, was that the old man, unable to restrain his impatience and curiosity, followed Eva home and stood bare-headed in the little hall.

"Is it true, Master Charlie?" was all he said.

"Quite true, Thomas."

And Thomas took out his old red handkerchief and applied it to his eyes, waving it about something like a flag of triumph.

"Then if it *is* true, Master Charlie, with your leave I will see about the new gardener at once."

When the others had all gone up to bed, Katie and Charlie sat on in the little sitting-room talking of the future.

"Kittums," he said, "there is one thing that nobody but you must know, not even Ursula.

There is a great deal of money, but I don't want much for myself; of course I shall keep enough just to be comfortable, in case I should ever take it into my head to marry; and the rest must be given to GOD. I have thought that if I gave those good Sisters, who nursed the people during the fever, enough to build the orphanage they wish to build, it would be the best thing. I should like it to be something that has to do with little children, because of our little one, and I should like it to be built in Northminster. I must see the Superior about it, and I cannot do that until I find out what Woodlands will realize. The will orders that it is to be sold, and Katie, will you pray for me that I may be worthy to make the offering?"

Katie could not find words in which to answer.

"My dear, dear Charlie," was all she said, and he was quite satisfied that she approved of what he meant to do.

Two years later, on the festival of S. Michael and all Angels, there was a great gathering in Northminster. Crowds flocked in from all parts of the county to the opening of the beautiful orphanage which the Sisters of S. Agatha had been enabled to build, through the munificence of some anonymous donor.

Beautiful in every detail was the new building, but perhaps what excited the most general admiration was the figure of an angel carrying a little child in his arms, which stood over the chapel door, and beneath it, in purest alabaster, was

carved a water-lily, and at its base were the words, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see GOD."

There was the usual holy service, the usual prayer for the founder, who was wholly unknown but to the Superior of S. Agatha's and to Katie, and it is hardly to be wondered at that during that prayer the latter's eye wandered to where far away low down amongst the crowd, Charlie stood, with bent head and a look of reverential awe upon his fair boyish face.

There was another standing by Katie's side on that day, who knew every secret of her heart, but that one which she had promised Charlie to keep so faithfully was never revealed even to him.



CHAPTER XVII.

THE END OF A DOLLY VARDEN.

“ Hence bashful cunning,
And prompt me, plain and holy innocence,
I am your wife if you will marry me.”

The Tempest.

THEY were in the old Grange by Christmas time, and it seemed as though the long months that had passed since they left it were but a dream, from which they had just awakened. It was the same, and yet how different : the Squire cheerful and content, wandering about the house and grounds, ready to be amused like a little child. Ursula able to move from room to room, and even to get into the garden ; perhaps to her the coming back was stranger than to any of them ; it had become a part of her life to lie upon the low couch in the Refuge, getting ready in all the calm and quiet of ill-health, to meet Harvey Russell “on the other shore ;” and now, she had as it were to come out of the stillness and repose into the bustle and

turmoil of every-day life. She did not rebel ; she was unutterably thankful for the partial gift of health which God had sent her ; but sometimes she longed for the calm that seemed to belong to the past—that now seemed so very far away, and then she remembered that storms and calm alike were sent by the great Captain to bring His people into the Haven where they would be.

As for Katie, she hardly knew how to be thankful enough for all the blessings that had come to her,—to have Duncan at home again, to hear little Eva's merry laugh ringing through the long passages, to watch the simple quiet goodness of her young sister-in-law, to feel that Charlie was everything that heart could desire, it seemed sometimes as though no earthly wish remained unfulfilled,—none but that longing yearning one to see Harry again.

She did not allow herself to indulge in it often, it would have unfitted her for every-day duties to have dreamed of what might have been, had it not been for that meeting in the lawyer's drawing-room on the day of the bank failure all those years ago.

“As thy day, so shall thy strength be,” the promise had been her comfort when her first great trouble came to her ; and it would be her comfort to the end.

The sisters were sitting together in the Refuge, (for Ursula's old room still retained its name,) the snow lay thick upon the ground, and the December

sun was lighting up the dreary landscape with a soft, mellow light.

“Like gleams from another world speaking to us of our great hope,” said Ursula, as her eye wandered lovingly over the fair landscape which she had looked upon all the years of her life, and which she seemed to love better and better every day.

They were both of them very merry on that December morning, laughing heartily over the Australian and Indian letters, for Frank had written that they had found another wife; Harold was going to marry the daughter of the colonel of a regiment stationed at Melbourne, and his brother added that she was everything that was good, only second to Amy. Then there were epistles from Leila and Ralph,—Leila’s full of praises of her baby, Ralph’s dwelling on no other theme than his wife’s perfections.

“There’s not a fellow in the cantonment married or single who does not envy me; she is always busy, always at work; not a bit of an Indian lady, does not seem to feel the heat more than our young daughter does.”

“It is strange,” said Katie, “what Leila has turned into, our languid, sentimental, romantic beauty.”

“Do you know what has done it all?” rejoined Ursula, “it was coming in contact with Ralph’s straightforward matter-of-fact common sense,—we were all of us too highly pitched, if I may use the

expression, to deal with her. I dare say she treats Ralph to a little high-flown nonsense still, but as he cannot understand it, it does not matter, and she appreciates his real worth too much to mourn over his want of sympathy in her romantic flights."

"Yes," answered Katie, "I dare say you are right; but now, Ursie, hold your head still, and let me try on this Dolly Varden,—there," and she placed the pretty little erection of muslin and lace and soft pink ribbon upon her sister's head,—"there, dearie, you look like your own self; as nice and as pretty as in the old days."

"Ah," and Ursula sighed; "I forgot I was coming out to-night; yes, I must try and look my best, for father's sake. He is so excited about this first dinner party of ours, he and Eva seem to look upon it quite as their entertainment."

"Yes, the dear old father, the sunshine has indeed come into his life after all the years of worry."

There was to be a great dinner party at the Grange that night, the first since "the mother" died, and Ursula was to appear in the drawing-room afterwards, she was not equal to sitting up for the weary two hours that she knew the meal would occupy.

Thomas was radiant with delight; he had been promoted to the post of butler, and that, and the efficiency of the new gardener (no longer a myth), seemed to crown his felicity.

"I must go and look after him directly," said Ursula, in answer to some remark made by Katie

as to the old man's powers of making things look as nice as they ought to look ; "Eva appeared just now with a great piece of crystallized fruit in her hand, and informed me Thomas had a lot more for her."

"Do not be long then, for I want to put the finishing touch to the Dolly Varden and try it on again, one of the bows just wants a little bit of alteration."

Ursula left the room, and Katie walked to the window, and stood there looking out, as Ursula had looked before, upon the view that would have been dreary, had it not been for a gleam of wintry sunshine.

There was a knock at the door, but she did not heed it, and when the handle was turned gently, and some one entered the room, she thought it was Ursula and said, "Wait a minute, Ursie dear, I am afraid I have been dreaming, I am just putting in the last stitch."

No answer, only a tread that was not Ursula's, and which sent the hot blood rushing to her face.

She turned quickly round, the poor little Dolly Varden dropped upon the floor, and sad to relate, was crushed beneath a somewhat muddy boot.

"Harry, oh Harry, I did not know you had come home."

He stood for an instant looking at her, the Harry of olden days, with the lithe figure, and the frank open face tanned by the suns of India, and the mingled expression of firmness and kindness about

the well-shaped mouth. She lifted her face to his after that first momentary surprise, and he made another step forward and seemed as though he would have taken her into his arms ; then he stopped : "Katie, if I asked you the question again that I have asked you twice before, would your answer be the same as it was then ?"

The answer came soft and low, but very distinct, "No, it would not."

"My own, my dearest one, my sweet Katie."

Then he picked up the poor Dolly Varden, and looked at it ruefully.

"It does not matter, Harry, I can make another."

He drew her to Ursula's couch, and there the two sat for more than an hour, she telling her story, he listening, and hanging upon every word that fell from her lips.

And at last he remembered that Margaret had walked to the Grange with him.

"She is in the drawing-room with Ursula, shall we go to her, Katie ?"

"Yes, it is a shame to have kept them so long."

"Long ! why I have not been here ten minutes."

Katie smiled saucily. "Why, it was just half-past eleven when you came in, and it is a quarter to one now."

"I couldn't have believed it ; now then, are you ready ?"

In the passage they met Charlie.

"Hullo, Harry, you at home! where have you been?"

"With Katie; I had something to say to her."

"Ah, I understand; Kittums, darling, let me be the first to wish you joy."

"Oh, Charlie, please don't."

"Well, I am ready to condole if you prefer it;" and he threw open the drawing-room door, and ushered the pair in.

There was no need for words, their faces told the tale; and Margaret put her arm round Katie's waist and whispered,

"I think this is the happiest day in all my life."

"Margaret, your love has made things easy to bear that sometimes were very hard."

"Hard, I should think they were, and you bore them all like a heroine."

"Excuse me," said Charlie, "according to Leila's and Katie's notions, heroines were people who died because they wouldn't be happy when the chance came; you're not quite a heroine yet, Kittums."

"Oh, Charlie, that was ever so long ago; indeed I never care now to do any great thing."

"Why, little one," and the young brother tossed up Eva in the air to hide the real deep feeling that was in his heart; "why, little one, you have been doing great things all through these years, living for others, never thinking of yourself; is it not so, father?" he said, turning to the old Squire, who, attracted by the sound of voices, had wandered into the drawing-room.

"I don't know what you are all talking about, I am sure; but if it's another wedding," and he turned to Harry and Katie as they stood side by side, "I must stipulate that there are no more partings, I am getting too old to stand them."

"I may take her to the Home Farm, may I not, sir? it is to let, and my father wishes me to see about it; he wants me to stay in England now, he says."

"Yes, I don't object to the Home Farm; with Ursula, and Duncan, and Mary, and my little Eva at home, we shall be able to get on without her; only, Harry," and he laid his hand on Katie's head with inexpressible, unwonted tenderness, "only, Harry, take care of her, for she's taken such care of us for such a long time."

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